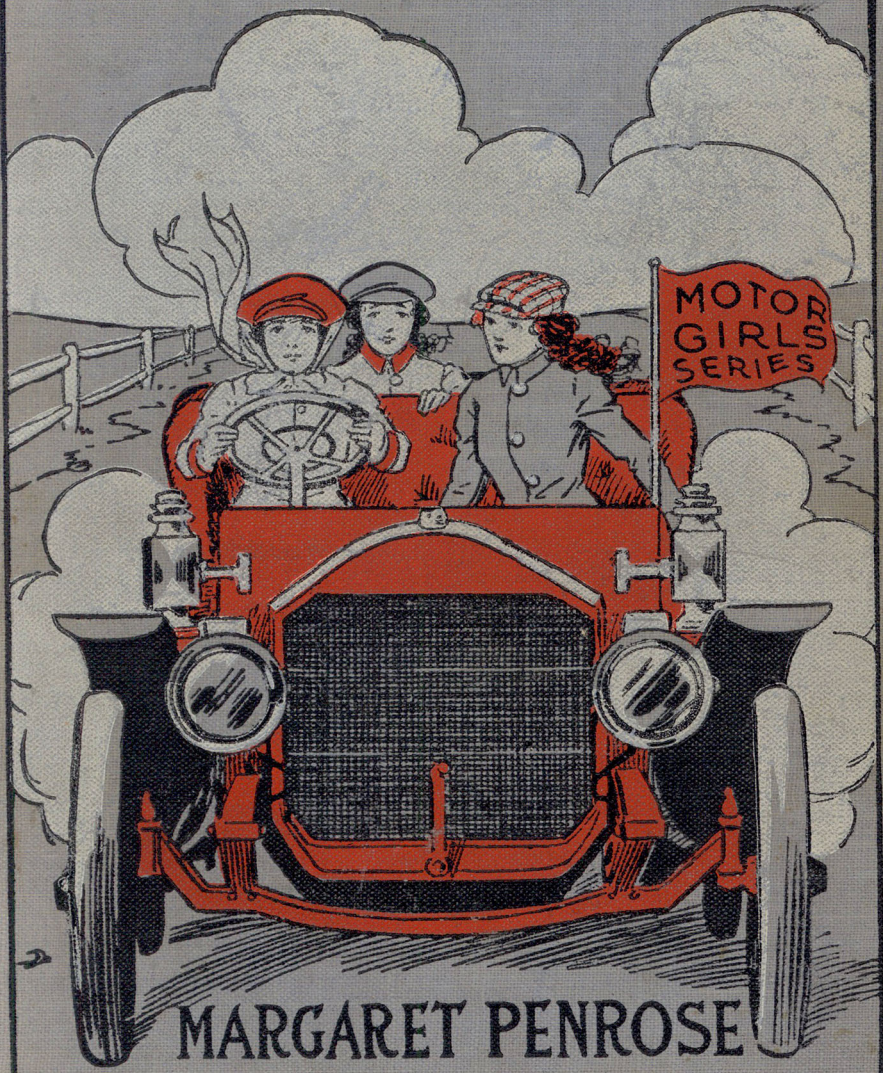
THE MOTOR GIRLS THROUGH NEW ENGLAND



MARGARET PENROSE

THE MOTOR GIRLS THROUGH NEW ENGLAND

MARGARET PENROSE

CUPPLES & LEON CO.

To Evelyn
From Father

Dec. 25, 1917

HE WAVED FOR CORA TO STOP.

THE MOTOR GIRLS THROUGH NEW ENGLAND

Or

Held by the Gypsies

BY

MARGARET PENROSE

AUTHOR OF "THE MOTOR GIRLS," "THE MOTOR GIRLS ON A TOUR," "THE MOTOR GIRLS AT LOOKOUT BEACH," "DOROTHY DALE," "DOROTHY DALE AND HER CHUMS," "DOROTHY DALE'S GREAT SECRET," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

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BY MARGARET PENROSE

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated

Price per volume, 60 cents, postpaid.

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CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

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THE MOTOR GIRLS THROUGH NEW ENGLAND

CHAPTER I

THE SHADOW

"Look, girls! There's a man!"

"Where?"

"Just creeping under the dining-room window!"

"What can he want—looks suspicious!"

"Oh, I'm afraid to go in!"

"Hush! We won't go in just now!"

"If only the boys were here!"

"Well, don't cry—they will be here soon."

"See! He's getting under the fence! There he goes!"

"Did you get a look at him?"

"Yes, a good look. I'll know him next time."

Bess, Belle and Cora were holding this whis-

pered conversation. It was Belle, the timid, who wanted to cry, and it was Cora who had really seen the man—got the good look. Bess did say she wished the boys were around, but Bess had great confidence in those boys, and this remark, when a man was actually sneaking around Clover Cottage, was perfectly pardonable.

The motor girls had just returned from a delightful afternoon ride along the shore road at Lookout Beach. Bess and Belle Robinson, otherwise Elizabeth and Isabel, the twins, were in their little car—the *Flyaway*—and Cora Kimball was driving her fine, four-cylinder touring affair, both machines having just pulled up in front of Clover Cottage, the summer home of the Robinsons.

"Did the boys say they would come directly from the post-office?" asked Belle, as she eyed the back fence suspiciously.

"Yes, they had to drop some mail in the box. We won't attempt to go in until they come. At any rate, I have a little something to do to the *Whirlwind,*" and Cora pulled off her gloves, and started to get a wrench out of the tool box.

"I'll get busy, too," declared Bess. "It will look better in case our friend happens to come around the corner."

"No danger," and Cora glanced up from the

tool box. "I fancy that gentleman is not of the type that runs into facts."

"Do you think he is a burglar?" asked Belle.

"Well, I wouldn't say just that. But he certainly is not straightforward. And that is a bad sign," replied Cora.

"And not a person in the house to help us," sighed Belle. "Oh, I don't see why mamma——"

"Now, Belle Robinson!" interrupted her sister. "You know perfectly well that mamma had to take Nellie and Rose over to Drifton. They have to get ready for school."

"Mamma fusses a lot over those two girls," continued Belle. "It seems to me a lucky thing they happened to run away—our way."

This remark was lost upon Bess and Cora. Bess was intent upon something—nothing definite—about the *Flyaway,* while Cora was working assiduously trying to adjust a leaky valve.

The prospect of dark coming on with no one but themselves about the cottage, and the late appearance of the strange man, kept each one busy thinking. Presently Belle exclaimed:

"Oh, here come the boys!" and without waiting for the young men to turn the corner, which marked the end of the Clover Cottage grounds, she ran along with the news.

Jack Kimball, Cora's brother, Walter Pennington, his chum, and Ed Foster, the friend of both, sauntered along.

"I suppose Belle will say we had a bandit," remarked Cora, with a laugh, "but to tell the truth, Bess, I did not like the fellow's looks." She closed the engine bonnet and hurried to the sidewalk.

"Neither did I," replied Bess, "but it never does to let Belle know how we feel. She is so nervous!"

"I'm glad the boys are here," finished Cora.

"Oh, I'm always glad when they are here," confessed Bess, stepping up beside Cora, as the two waited for Belle and the young men to come up the gravel walk.

"Hello, there!" saluted Jack. "More haunted house?"

"No, only more haunts," replied Cora. "Guess he didn't like the style of the house."

"Oh, you girls are too fussy," said Ed. "Seems to me if I were a young lady, and saw a young chap hanging under my window, I'd be sort of flattered."

"We prefer the hanging done in the open," exclaimed Bess. "Besides, he didn't hang—he sneaked."

"He crawled," declared Belle.

"No, I distinctly saw him creep," corrected Cora.

"Mere baby, evidently," hazarded Walter. "Well, I suppose he was after——"

"Grub," interrupted Jack. "The creeping, crawling, sneaking kind invariably want grub. It was a shame to let him go off hungry."

They all took seats upon the broad piazza, after the boys, by a casual look, were satisfied that no intruder was about the grounds. Belle kept close to Ed—he was the largest of the young men—but Cora and Bess showed no signs of fear.

"Let's tell you about it," began Bess.

"Let's," agreed Walter.

"Then listen," ordered the young lady with the very rosy cheeks.

"Listen while they let's," teased Jack.

"I won't say one word," declared Bess; "not if the fellow comes down the chimney——"

Every one laughed. Bess had such a ridiculous way of getting angry.

"No joking," went on Cora, "when we came up the road we did see a fellow sneaking around the cottage. I'm not exactly afraid, ahem! but I may as well admit that I am glad you boys appeared

just now, and I hope the interloper caught a glimpse, ahem! of your manly forms."

The three boys jumped up as if some one had touched a spring. Ed was taller, Walter was stouter and Jack was—well, he was quicker. Bess noticed that, and did not hesitate to say so in making her special report of the trio.

"At any rate," ventured Ed, "we are much obliged, Cora. It's awfully nice of you to notice us."

"Suppose we take a look through the house," suggested Cora. "Not that I think anything is wrong. You know, girls are never really afraid——"

"Oh, no! they are only afraid of being afraid," interrupted Walter. "Well, come along. And, since Ed is the biggest, let him lead!"

The incident merely furnished sport for the boys. A burglar hunt was no uncommon thing at Clover Cottage, and this one was no more promising that had been a dozen others. Belle did not venture in with the searching party. She had her fears, as usual. Cora by reputation was not timid, and she had that reputation to maintain just now. As a matter of fact, she knew perfectly well that the man who took the trouble to crawl around the house had some sinister

motive in doing so. Bess had not really seen him do it, so when she went in, along with the boys, she had scarcely any fear of running down either a sneak thief or a tramp, both varieties of undesirable citizens being common enough at the watering place.

It did not strike Cora Kimball just then that she had a particular part to play in the impending drama which was to involve herself and her friends. In the first volume of the series, entitled "The Motor Girls," Cora found it her duty to unravel the mystery of the road, when a wallet, empty, but which should have contained a small fortune in bonds, was actually found in the tool box of her own car. Then in the next volume, "The Motor Girls on a Tour," Cora again had the lines of the leading lady, for it fell to her lot to "keep the promise" that restored little Wren, the cripple, to her own, both in money and in health. In the third book of the series, "The Motor Girls at Lookout Beach," it was Cora again who had to unearth the mystery, and now——

She smiled as she followed Ed into the big pantry.

"You girls and boys seem to count me a star," she said pleasantly. "Ever since we were organized you have been keeping me in——"

"The spotlight," finished Ed, with an unmistakable smile. "Well, Cora, we will try to let you down easy this time. Here, Bess, you poke your nose in the cubby hole and see if you see anything."

"Oh!" screamed Bess, "I'll do nothing of the sort. Let Cora."

"Why?" asked Cora.

"Because—you're never the least bit afraid," stammered Bess.

"Thanks," said Cora, without hesitation thrusting her head into the aperture through which dishes were passed. "Ouch!" she exclaimed, hastily withdrawing with her hand on her nose.

"What's the matter?" asked Ed. "Did you bump into something?"

"Yes," replied Cora, looking straight into the eyes of Bess. "I just bumped into—a fact."

Then she and her brother walked into another room, leaving their friends to discuss the happening and follow at their leisure.

CHAPTER II

STRIKE OF THE "LEADING LADY"

"EXACTLY what did you mean, Cora?"

"You know perfectly well, Jack."

"No, really, I did not know what you—bumped into. Did you hurt your nose?"

"Not the least bit, my dear brother. And the real bump—the fact, you know—was that I just discovered how much these two little girls depend upon me. Bess said I was never the least bit afraid——"

"And are you?"

"Perhaps. At any rate, I didn't like the looks of that man, Jack. I don't intend the girls shall know it, but I was just the least bit afraid to come in the house. Who do you suppose he might be?"

"Why, Cora!" and Jack looked his surprise. "What's up? Are you going to strike?"

"Don't you believe me, Jack, that I was afraid?"

"It is not like you. But I suppose there was something——"

"Well, Jack, even a leading lady may get tired. I am going to try to do a little less of the leading."

"Angry with the girls?"

"Why, bless you, no. Why should I be? Aren't they the dearest—babies. But you boys——"

"Oh, mad at us! Cora Kimball!" and her brother threatened to injure his beauty on the matting rug. "If I had only the least idea that you didn't like us, I would have packed the whole crowd off to the bungalow."

"Still you insist upon misunderstanding me. Well, I may as well give up, Jack. Let us talk about something else."

"I might make another mistake. But I would like to tell you what some of the boys said about the dance last night. They were just raving about you. Did you like Porter?"

"The boy with a smile? Yes, I did. I don't know when I saw a young man so real. You know, Jack, with all due respect to boys hovering around twenty, they usually display too much —hover."

"Chumpy, you mean."

"If the word were a little less—aspirated. Girls might say—crude."

"Real nice of the girls. But Porter asked me if I'd bring him around."

"Why not? Bess had a splendid time with him."

"But he spoke of you, Cora. And he's a great fellow at college."

"By all means cultivate the great," replied Cora. "But here come the others. Ask them."

"Striking again, Cora. All right. If Porter wants to take Bess to the games——"

"He's welcome. I have already promised Ed."

It was an hour after the strange-man scare, and the Robinson girls had finally been convinced that there were no miscreants lurking anywhere about the place. The excitement had made Bess prettier in the deep, red flush that overspread her face, and Belle, the pale, dainty blonde, had actually taken on a tint herself. Cora had the color that comes and stays, and only her deep brown eyes seemed brighter after the hunt had been declared "off."

"If mother were only home," sighed Belle.

"Thank goodness, she is not," put in Bess. "Bad enough to hunt burglars without consoling mamma."

"Are you girls going to stay alone to-night?" asked Ed suddenly.

"Oh, no, indeed! We expect Nettie back from the city. Never was there a girl like Nettie for scaring away scares," replied Bess.

"But suppose she does not come?" spoke Jack. "Don't you think it might be well——"

"To hire a special officer? No, thank you," answered Cora. "We are not the least bit afraid. Besides, we have a gun."

"The dearest little revolver," went on Bess. "Father got it specially for mamma, and she won't even look at it, so it's mine."

"Yes, and you most scared Nettie to death with it," interrupted the twin sister. "What do you think, boys? Nettie wouldn't touch the thing, and actually took a dustpan and a brush and scooped the weapon up from under Bess's pillow. Wasn't that dangerous?"

"And dumped it in the bureau drawer," added Cora, with a laugh. "Better let me take charge of that, Bess. I won't take chances with Nettie scooping it up while I'm here."

"Very well, Cora. You may take charge of it. Father suggested it was not a bad thing to have along when we take lonely runs. But, of course, I should never dare to fire it even to scare a tramp."

"Say, are you girls going to stay here all summer?" asked Walter. "I thought you had planned for a tour somewhere."

"We have. We are going to tour in our cars through New England," answered Cora. "First, we are going to the Berkshires, then we may go to the White Mountains. Of course, we are not going to let our cars get rusty around here."

"No, indeed," put in Bess. "We are only waiting to arrange about our chaperon. Isn't it dreadful to be a girl, and have to be toted around under some maternal wing?"

"Well, no. I shouldn't exactly think it dreadful to be a girl," and Jack made a funny face; "that is, a real nice twin girl, with rosy eyes and blue cheeks——"

"Jack!"

"But I was just going to say," went on that young man, "that the toting around might be inconvenient—at times."

"Couldn't a fellow or two do the toting?" asked Walter the innocent.

"That's just exactly the trouble. If we were perfectly sure we would not meet a fellow or two," replied Belle, making a very pretty mouth at Walter, "there would be no need of the toting."

"Then don't meet them—take them along. I'll go."

"Me, too," added Ed.

"Me, three," multiplied Jack.

"We fully expected you all to come," drawled Cora coolly.

"Oh, you did? Isn't that nice! They fully expected us all to come, and never told us a word about it. Now, that's what I call real cozy, and real——"

"Jack," interrupted Cora, "have we ever had a long trip entirely without you?"

"Seems to me you did have one or two—rather disastrous they were, too, if I remember aright. But we caught up. Now this time you are really going to allow us to go in the line, eh?"

"Just to wind up the season," Cora reminded him.

"Oh, sort of a winder. Well, it's all right, Cora. I hope we can fix it to go. When do we start, if a fellow might make bold to ask? You see, my car is in the shop. Walter has loaned his to some one up the State. But a little thing like that doesn't matter when the girls say we shall go——"

"If we have to walk," finished Ed.

"We did plan to leave as soon as mamma could

arrange about a friend of hers to accompany us," said Bess, with a sigh. "We hoped she would know when she came back to-morrow."

"Well, I'm going to take my car down to the garage," remarked Cora, getting up from the porch swing. "We can talk of the trip after tea. And we have also decided to ask you poor, starved bungalofers to tea. Have you had any since you went to housekeeping?"

"Ed *said* it was tea," replied Jack, "but I think it was stove polish thinned out. We didn't really enjoy it. Now, that's awfully nice. To stay to tea! Bess, may I take your car in for you?"

"If you would, Jack. I am lazy after the sunny ride. Seems to me the sun never goes down at the beach."

Ed had not asked permission to run Cora's car down the street for her, but he was now cranking up, while Walter deliberately took his place at the wheel.

"Let the 'chiffonier' do the work," said Walter, with a laugh. "He loves work."

Cora stepped lightly into the tonneau of her handsome machine, and Ed followed. "To the Imperial!" he shouted into Walter's ear, "and see that you get there, man!"

So the tables were turned, and Walter was "do-

ing the work." As there was nothing left to do, Walter threw in the gear lever and let in the clutch, while Cora, laughing at the trick, settled herself comfortably at the side of Ed. The *Whirlwind* skimmed along the avenue, first down to the post office and later fetched up at the garage. Bess and Jack, with Belle, followed, and as the little party glided along through the seaside town, many admiring glances were cast in their direction.

"If Nettie does not come," remarked Ed, "are you sure, Cora, you won't be the least bit afraid alone at the cottage?"

"Why, no. There is a telephone wire over to the hotel, and, besides, I'm going to cock the little ivory pistol before I go to bed. A sneak thief always runs at the very sound of a pistol."

"Well, I hope you will have no occasion to fire," replied Ed, "but, if you do, fire from the south window, and we will hear you."

"And run all the way up the beach?" Cora told him, laughing at the possibility. "Why, there is always an officer on the pier, and he will be only too glad to have a run—he needs it."

"You have it all planned?"

"No, how silly! I was only thinking that in a real emergency it is well to be ready."

"I guess you won't have any trouble. Here, man," to Walter, "don't you know better than to drive the lady into the barn?"

But Walter paid no heed, and before the car stopped it was properly stalled in the very end of the big stone garage.

CHAPTER III

A MISHAP

"THE tea was just right," declared Ed, "and I can't see why you will not consent to let us entertain you for the remainder of the evening. Just because the maid has not come down is surely no reason why you should lose such a fine evening's sport."

"But we never leave the house entirely alone after dark," protested Belle vaguely.

"Lucky house," put in Jack. "But I don't believe the cottage would mind it the least bit, would you?" and he put his ear to the wall. "No, it says to go ahead. Yes? What's that? Delighted? Of course, I knew it would be. Nice Clover," and he patted the plain, white wall. "Of course, you want the girls to go out with us in that dandy little launch. I knew it! Now, girls, get ready. It is time to start."

"And no chaper—" they all protested.

"Quit!" shouted Walter. "I have it on good

authority that when a girl's brother is along, and when there are twins in the same party, and when there are two fellows, near twins, in aforesaid same party, that makes a cross-finger combination on the chaperon. She doesn't have to come along."

Walter was looking his very best, which was always good, for the brown boy was now browner than ever, with the tan of beach sand and sun. Bess wore a most becoming linen gown, with just a rim of embroidered pink around her plump neck, and she, too, looked charming. Then Belle —Belle always wore dainty things, she was so perfectly blonde and so bisquelike. Her gown was of the simplest silvery stuff that Jack described as cloudy. Cora, after her auto trip of the afternoon, had "freshed up" in dazzling white. She loved contrast, and invariably, after driving, would don something directly opposite to that required for motoring. Her dark hair looked blacker than usual against the fleecy white, and her face was strictly handsome. Cora Kimball had grown from pretty to handsome just as naturally as a bud unfolds into a flower, with the attending dignity.

"If Cora thinks it's all right," weakened Bess.

"I don't see why we shouldn't go," replied

Cora, "especially as the boys cannot have the launch for another evening. But I suppose that would mean a second change of dress," with a look at the flimsy costumes about her.

"Why?" asked Jack.

"These—in the evening on the water?"

"Why not? Wear shawls or something——"

"Yes," assented Belle. "It is all right to be dressed up in a launch when we don't have to motor the boat."

"Oh, I'll attend to the motoring," promised Ed. "I am the fellow who borrowed the boat."

"Has Nettie a key?" asked Cora.

"I guess so," replied Bess. "We can leave the cellar window——"

"We can do nothing of the sort, Bess Robinson," interrupted Belle, "and have that man sneak in? I guess not!"

"Oh, your man!" protested Jack. "Haven't you forgotten him yet? That's what I call faithful."

"Well, at any rate, I am sure Nettie has her key," finished Bess. "And there is only one more train. If she does not come——"

"I'll sleep in the hammock on the porch," volunteered Jack. "It would be heaps better than melting in the bungalow to-night."

"I thought that bungalow was perfection," remarked Belle.

"It is—on the catalogue. But after a day's sun like to-day we just put our ham and eggs on the corrugated iron roof, and they are done to a turn in the morning, with nice little ridge patterns on them."

"If we are going sailing, we'd better be at it," Walter reminded them. Whereat the girls ran off to get wraps, and shortly returned ready for the trip.

Nor were the wraps lacking in beauty or usefulness. Cora had a family shawl—the kind that defies description outside of the French-English fashion papers. It was of the Paisley order, and did not seem to be cut any place; at the same time it fell in folds about her arms and neck with some invisible fastenings. Her hood was made from a piece of the same wonderfully embroidered stuff—a big red star, with the points drawn in. Bess and Belle both wore pretty cloaks of eiderdown. Bess was in pink and Belle in blue.

"Take your guitar, Cora," suggested Ed. "We will have some singing."

"And you can play that piece—what is it? 'Love's Hankering?' " asked Jack.

" 'Love's Triumph,' " corrected Bess, "and it's

the prettiest piece out this summer. Cora plays it beautifully."

"It *is* pretty," confirmed Belle.

"Yes, I like it," admitted Cora. "As long as you are bent on a romantic evening, we may as well have the little love song," and she slipped the strap of her guitar case over her arm as they started off.

Jack took his banjo. He, too, liked the new summer "hit;" in fact, every one was whistling it as well as they could, but it took tuned strings to give it the correct interpretation.

It was delightful on the water. The smaller bay opened into another and provided safe motor boating. The tide was slowly receding, and as the party glided along, little moonlight-tipped waves seemed to caress the launch. Jack and Cora were playing, Bess and Belle were humming, while Walter was "breathing sounds" that could scarcely be classified, and Ed was content to run the motor.

"Now, isn't that pretty?" asked Belle of Ed, as Cora and Jack finished the popular piece.

"Very catchy," replied the young man.

"But Cora has given it a twist of her own," said Jack; "the end goes this way," and he correctly played a few bars, "while Cora likes it

thusly," and he played a strain or two more in different style.

Was it the moonlight on the baby waves? was it the murmur of that gliding boat? or was it something indefinable that so awakened the sentiments of the party of gay motorists?

For some moments no one spoke; then Jack broke the spell with a lively fandango, played in solo.

"This seems too good to last," prophesied Belle, with a sigh, "Do you think it was all right to leave the cottage alone?"

"Now, Tinkle," and Walter moved as if to take her hand, "haven't we assured you that the cottage expressly desired to be left alone to-night, and that we fellows wanted your company?"

It was a pretty speech for Walter, and was not lost on the sensitive Belle.

"How about sand bars, Ed?" asked Jack. "Might we run onto one?"

"We might, but I guess I could feel one coming. The tide is getting away. We had better veer toward the shore."

"Oh! is there danger?" asked Belle, immediately alarmed.

"Not much," replied Ed, "but we wouldn't like to walk home from this point." He was twisting

the wheel so that the launch almost turned. Then a sound like something grating startled them.

"Bottom!" exclaimed Jack, jumping up and going toward the wheel. "That was ground, Ed!"

"Sounded a lot like it, but we can push off. Get that oar there, Walter; get the other and ——"

The launch gave a jerk and then stopped!

"Oh! what is it?" asked Bess and Belle in one voice.

"Nothing serious," Cora assured them. "You see, the tide has gone out so quickly that it has left us on a sand bar. I guess the boys can push off. They know how to handle oars."

But this time even skillful handling of oars would not move the launch. Ed ran the motor at full speed ahead and reversed, but the boat remained on the bar, which now, as the tide rapidly lowered, could be plainly seen in the moonlight.

"What next?" asked Cora coolly.

"Hard to say," replied Ed, in rather a mournful tone. "If we had gone down the bay, we would not have been alone, but I thought this upper end so much more attractive to-night. However, we need not despair. We can wait for the tide."

"Till morning!" almost shouted Belle.

"It's due at three-thirty," announced the imperturbable Walter.

"Oh! what shall we do?" wailed Bess.

"We might walk," suggested Cora. "It isn't very far to that shore, and it's shallow."

"Mercy, no!" exclaimed Belle. "There are all sorts of holes in the mud here. I would stay forever before I would try walking."

Cora laughed. She had no idea of being taken seriously.

"Now, you see," said Walter, "my wisdom in curtailing the chaperon. Just imagine her now," and he rolled laughingly over toward Jack.

"Easy there! No need for artificial respiration or barrel-rolling just yet," declared Jack. "In fact, if we had a bit of water, we'd be thankful. Let me work the engine, Ed. Maybe I can give luck a turn and get more push out of it."

Ed left his place, and Jack took it, but the sand bar held the little launch like adamant, and it seemed useless to exert the gasoline power further.

"Supppose we have the little ditty again," suggested Ed, taking a seat near Cora. "What was it? 'Love's Latitude?' "

"No, 'Love's Luxury,' " asserted Walter, as he

made a comical move toward Belle. But Belle was disconsolate, and she only looked at the moon. It was almost funny, but the humor was entirely lost on the frightened girl.

"When in doubt play 'The Gypsy's Warning,'" suggested Cora, picking up her guitar. "There is something bewitching about that tune."

"See if we can bewitch a wave or two with it," remarked Jack. "That would fetch us in a little nearer to shore."

But the situation was becoming more serious each moment. There they were—high though not exactly dry upon a big sand bar! Not a craft was in sight, and none within call!

"If we only could trust the bottom, we fellows might get out and push her off," suggested Walter, "but it wouldn't be nice to get right in the line with Davy Jones' locker."

"Oh, please don't do that," begged Bess. "It will be better to stay safely here and wait for the tide than to take any chance of losing——"

"Wallie. Sometimes he's Walter, but when it comes to the possibility of our losing him, he's Wallie," declared Jack, clasping his arms around the other boy's neck. "Starboard watch ahoy!"

"Right about face, forward march!" called Walter ridiculously.

"That's not the same set," corrected Jack. "This was another kind of a watch—stem winder."

The jollying of the boys kept the girls from actually feeling the seriousness of their plight. But to wait until morning for the tide!

CHAPTER IV

TO THE RESCUE

"DON'T tell the girls, but I am going to swim ashore," whispered Walter to Jack. "A nice fix we would be in if Mrs. Robinson came home and found the girls missing."

"Swim ashore!" repeated Jack in surprise. "Why, Walter, it's a mile!"

"Can't help it. I can do it, and I see a light directly opposite here. You give Ed the tip to keep the girls busy, while you stay back here with me. I'll be overboard in no time."

Jack tried to persuade his friend not to take the risk, but Walter was determined; so, unobservedly divesting himself of his heaviest garments, he dropped over the side of the launch and was soon stroking for the shore.

For some time the girls did not miss him, but Belle, keen to scent danger, abruptly asked if Walter had fallen asleep.

"Yes," drawled Jack, "he is the laziest fellow."

Cora pinched Jack's arm, and he in return gave her two firm impressions. She instantly knew that something was going on, and did her best to divert Belle's attention from it.

"But where—is—he!" exclaimed Belle, for her gaze had traveled to the end of the launch and back again without seeing Walter. "He—is gone!"

Realizing that the young man was actually not aboard the boat, she sank down in abject terror, ready to cry.

"Don't take on so," said Ed. "He is all right. He has gone ashore to get help."

"Gone ashore!" exclaimed both Belle and Bess in a breath.

"Girls, do you imagine we would sit here calmly and try to quiet you if there was anything actually wrong?" asked Cora. "Why don't you give the boys credit, once in a while, for having a little common sense?"

Looking across the water, the movement of the swimming youth could be seen, where the moonlight reflected on the waves.

"Oh, I am so frightened!" exclaimed Belle. "I felt that something would happen!"

"Something always does happen when it is expected," Cora told her, "but let us hope it will be

nothing worse than what we already are conscious of. It was splendid of Walter to go, and I am sure he will return safely."

"He's a first-rate swimmer," declared Ed, looking anxiously at the little rippling motion that marked Walter's progress. "He can easily go a mile."

Then quiet settled upon the party. It was, indeed, a gloomy prospect. Stranded—Walter swimming in the bay—and nothing but sky above and water beyond them, just far enough away to be out of the reach of the launch.

All the thoughts of the young folks seemed to follow Walter. Belle hid her face in her hands, Bess clung to Cora, and the two young men watched the progress of the swimmer.

It seemed hours when, suddenly, a movement in the water, not far from them both, was noticed by Bess.

"Oh! what is that?" she called. "Can it be——"

"Oh, it's Walter!" shrieked Belle, clasping her hands.

"It can't be!" answered Ed, at the some moment raising a lantern above his head to see, if possible, what was making the splash in the water.

"It's as big—as—a——," began Belle.

"Horse!" finished Cora. "I saw a head just then."

"Oh, it's a whale!" cried Bess, actually dropping into the bottom of the boat as if to hide from the monster.

"And he may have eaten Walter!" wailed Belle.

"Girls!" commanded Cora. "Do try not to be so foolish. There are no whales in this bay." But all the same her voice was unsteady, and she would have given worlds for a reassuring shout from Walter.

Another splash!

"There he goes! It's a porpoise!" cried Jack. "No danger of one of those hog-fish going near a man. They're as timid as mice. Just see him go! There ought to be a lot of others, for they generally go in schools. Maybe this one was kept in because he couldn't spell 'book,' and is just getting home."

Cora breathed a sigh of relief at Jack's joking tone. She didn't care to see the big fish swim—she was only too glad that he was going, and that he was of the harmless species described by Jack. The others watched the porpoise as he made his way out to the open sea.

"My, I'll bet Walter was frightened if he met

that fellow," said Ed. "I wish he hadn't gone," he whispered to Jack a moment later.

"He said he would fire a pistol when he got to shore. He took a little one with him, and it's waterproof. Let's listen."

As if the magical words had gone by wireless, at that very moment a shot was heard!

"There! He's safe! That was his signal!" cried Jack, and Cora said afterwards that he hugged Belle, although the youth declared it was his own sister whom he had embraced.

"Now, we will only have to wait and not worry," Ed remarked. "Over at that light there must be human beings, and they must have boats. Boats plus humans equal rescue."

The relief from anxiety put the girls in better spirits. Bess and Belle wondered if Nettie had returned, and speculated whether, on finding them gone, she might have notified the police. Cora was thinking about what sort of lifeboat Walter would return with, while Ed and Jack were content to look and listen.

A good hour passed, when a light could be seen moving about the beach.

"They're coming, all right," declared Ed. "Watch that glimmer."

The light moved first to the north, then in the

other direction, until finally it became steady and was heading straight for the party in distress.

"Wave your lantern," suggested Cora. "They may not be able to see it as it stands."

Ed stood on the seat and circled the light about his head.

Breathlessly they stood there—waiting, wondering and watching.

"I'm going to call," said Bess, at the same moment shouting, "Walter!" at the top of her voice.

"C-o-m-ing!" came the reply, and this time it was an open question whether Bess hugged Ed or Jack.

"Now we will be all right," breathed Belle. "Oh, I shall never want to see a motor boat again! The *Flyaway* is good enough for me."

"Yes, I fancy a motor on the earth myself," Cora agreed, "but, of course, a little experience like this adds to our general knowledge. I hope Walter is all right."

"Just hear him laugh," said Jack, as a chuckle came over the water. "Likely he has struck up with some mermaid. It would be just Wallie's luck."

The merry voices that could now be heard were reassuring indeed. Nearer and nearer they came, until the girls actually became interested to the

extent of arranging side combs and otherwise attending to little niceties, dear to the heart of all girls.

"It's a mermaid, sure," declared Jack. "I heard her giggle!" and he grabbed out Cora's side comb to arrange his own hair.

"Oh, it *is*—a girl," whispered Bess to Cora. "I heard her voice."

"I hope she's nice," answered Cora, "but as long as we get some one to pull us off we have no occasion to be particular."

By this time the rowboat was almost alongside.

"Hurrah!" shouted Jack.

"Also hurray!" added Ed.

"Walter, you're a brick!" exclaimed Cora fervently.

The light of the lantern now fell upon the face of the stranger.

The stranded ones looked upon the countenance of a girl, not perhaps a very young girl, nor a very pretty girl, but her face was pleasant, and she pulled a stroke as steady as did Walter.

Walter stood up. He was enveloped in a bath robe!

CHAPTER V

FRIEND OR FOE?

WHEN their launch pulled up to the dock that night, an anxious party greeted them. Nettie had returned from the city, and upon finding the cottage deserted had waited a reasonable length of time before consulting the neighbors. Then she found that the young folks had gone sailing.

That settled it, for the waters of the bay are never considered too reliable, and when the girls did not return by ten o'clock Nettie locked up the cottage and set off for the beach.

Of course, she learned that such a party had gone out, but in what direction no one along the beach front seemed to know. The upper bay course was the last thing thought of, and, when Nettie did succeed in hiring a fisherman to set out and search, he went down the cove opposite to the course taken by Ed in his motor boat.

In half an hour the fisherman returned, and, as luck would have it, he brought with him Wal-

ter's cap, which had fallen overboard as the youth started out from the stalled motor boat, and so drifted in the other direction.

In the rapid time that bad news always flies, the report became circulated that a sailing party was lost. Hazel and Paul Hastings, two friends of the motor girls, heard the report at their cottage, and hurried down to the little wharf, where they found Nettie in the deepest distress.

Just as Paul was about to set out himself, the launch chugged in, with the party laughing and singing, Cora playing that same tune, and with our friends was the little lady from the bungalow, she who had rescued Walter, and who went with him to the succor of the stranded ones on the sand bar.

It was a wonderful evening, and when Cora, with Bess, Belle and Miss Robbins, the new girl, stepped ashore, they evidently did not regret the length of time spent upon the water.

Miss Robbins, it developed, was a young doctor, stopping up the river in a bungalow with her mother. Her boat was towed by the launch when they came in, and, although she wanted to row back, the others would not listen to such a proposition.

"It won't take half an hour to get to the garage

and bring my car right down here," insisted Walter, "unless you prefer walking up to the cottage with the young ladies, and I can run over there for you. I will have you back in your bungalow in ten minutes more."

Miss Robbins was one of those rare young women who always did what was proposed for her, and she now promptly agreed to go to the cottage, and there await Walter and his car.

As they entered the little parlor Bess drew Cora aside and demanded:

"How ever did Walter find out that she'd just love to go to the Berkshires? And he wants to know if she is *homely* enough to be our chaperon," she added, with a laugh.

"She is," replied Jack's sister promptly, and in a tone of voice remarkably decisive for Cora, considering.

"But she's nice," objected Bess.

"Very," confirmed Cora, "and we should conform to the rules—homely, experienced and wise."

"She's a lot of those," went on Bess, who seemed taken with the idea of going to the hills with Miss Robbins as chaperon. "Besides, I like her."

"That's a lot more," said Cora, with a laugh.

"I like her, too. It seems to me almost providential. We are going to the Berkshires, she wants to go, we can't get a mother to take us, so a young doctor ought to be the——"

"Very thing," finished Bess, and she joined the others indoors.

"But here is Walter back. How quickly he got around! Looks as if Walter is very keen on time—this time," and the tooting of the auto horn outside drew them to the door.

"Walter's privilege," whispered Cora, just as Miss Robbins hurried to the steps.

"Isn't this splendid," said the stranger, with polite gratitude.

"One would not mind getting shipwrecked often for an auto ride. And such an evening! or night, I suppose it is now."

"I'll go along," said Cora, realizing that she ought to do so.

"Me, too," said Jack, thinking he should go with Cora.

Bess and Belle would then be alone with Ed. Of course, Nettie was about, and they might sit on the porch until the others returned. Jack jumped in with Walter, while Cora and Miss Robbins took the second seat. The car was not Wal-

ter's runabout, but a larger machine from the garage.

"I'll have to come down in the morning for my boat," said Miss Robbins. "We've been living on soft clams lately, and I have to go out quite a way to dig them."

"Do you dig them?" asked Cora.

"Of course, why not? It is muddy and dirty, but it's lots cheaper than buying them, and then we are sure they are fresh."

"I'll go up in the boat when I fetch the robe back," said Walter, who, it was plain to be seen, liked the excuse to visit the bungalow on the rocks. "What time do you clam?"

"Well, I have to call at the fresh-air camp tomorrow. I'll be back about eleven, and can then get some dug in time for lunch."

"We are bungalowing," spoke Jack. "Why can't we clam, Wallie?"

Walter poked his free elbow into Jack's ribs.

"You can, of course, what's to prevent you," and he gave him such another hard jab that Jack grabbed the elbow. "But I wouldn't start tomorrow—it's unlucky to clam on Wednesday," finished Walter.

The girls were too busy talking to notice the

boys' conversation, if the pokes and exclamations might be classified as such.

"Don't you ever sink?" called back Jack to Miss Robbins.

"Oh my, no! I can tell all the safe and unsafe places." And she laughed merrily.

"It is late for us to bring you home," said Cora. "I hope your mother won't be frightened at your absence."

"Oh, no, mother has absolute confidence in me," replied Miss Robbins. "You see, mother and I are chums. We built the bungalow."

"Built it?" echoed Cora.

"Yes, indeed. You must come around in daylight and inspect it. Poverty may not be a blessing, but it is a pace-setter."

Walter felt this was the very kind of a girl he had dreamed of. She might not be pretty, but when she tossed the bath robe out to him as he was virtually washed up at her door, tossed it out while she ran to get her own wraps to join him in the rescue, he felt instantly that this girl was a "find." Then, when she spoke of going to the Berkshires, he was further convinced, and now, when she told of building a bungalow—what an acquisition such a woman would be!

"Aren't you afraid in the bungalow—just you

and your mother in this lonely place?" asked Cora, as they drew up to the territory that outlined a camping ground.

"Well we never have been afraid," replied Miss Robbins, "as I am pretty good with a revolver, but there seems to be some tramps around here lately. One visited us this morning before breakfast, and mother remarked he was not at all a pleasant sort of customer."

"We had something like a similar call," said Cora, "only the man didn't ring the bell—he crawled around the house."

"Mercy! Why didn't the boys chase him?"

"They did, but he was beyond chase when they arrived. That's the one thing uncertain about boys—their presence when one wants them," and Cora stepped out of the machine to allow Miss Robbins room to pass.

"There's a light in the window," remarked Jack, as he, too, alighted from the machine.

"And there's mother! Mother, come out a minute," called Miss Robbins. "I want to——"

"Daughter!" exclaimed the woman at the little door. "I am almost frightened to death. What happened? Where's your boat?"

"Why! you frightened, mother? About me?"

"Well, I suppose I should not have been," and

the lady smiled as she stepped within range of the auto lamps. "But that horrid tramp. He came again!"

"He did! How long ago?"

"Just as you left. I cannot imagine why he should sneak around here at this hour. He could not have wanted food."

There was no time for introductions. The excitement of Mrs. Robbins precluded any such formality. All talked just as if they had been well acquainted.

"We could tell the town officers," suggested Walter. "It is not safe for women to be alone away up here."

"He wanted to hire a boat, Regina," said the mother, "just as if he could not get one handy at the pier."

"Shall we hunt for you?" asked Jack. "We are professional burglar hunters—do it 'most every evening."

"Oh, thank you! but there are no hiding places about our shack. Either you are in it or out of it, and in one way or the other one is bound to be in evidence," said Miss Robbins, smiling frankly.

"What did your visitor look like?" inquired Cora.

"He was tall and dark and very stooped," re-

plied Mrs. Robbins. "Besides this, I noticed he wore boots with his trousers outside, as a farmer or clammer wears them."

"Oh!" said Cora simply. But she did not add that this description tallied somewhat with that of the man she had seen about Clover Cottage. She particularly saw the boots, but many clammers wear them that way.

"I fancy the girls will be timid to-night," Cora remarked, as they started back to the cottage.

"Yes, this has been what you might call a portentous evening," agreed Walter, "and I do declare I think Miss Robbins is—well—nice, to put it mildly."

"Wallie," said Jack. "I will have an awful time with you, I can see that. But you are young, boy, very young, and she is already a doctor, so maybe there is hope—she may be able to cure you."

CHAPTER VI

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

"HUSH!"

"I heard it!"

"Call Nettie!"

"I would have to go out in the hall—the noise was somewhere near the second stairs."

"But I am so frightened—I shall die!"

"No, you won't. Please be quiet! I have the little revolver!"

Cora crept out of bed and left Belle trembling there. She only advanced a few steps when the sounds in the hall again startled her. The stairs certainly creaked. There was no cat, no dog. Some one was walking on those steps.

Cora realized that discretion was the better part of valor. It would be foolhardy to run out in the hall, even with the cocked revolver in her hand. If she could only touch the button of the electric hall light! She stepped out cautiously. Something seemed very near, yet, at that moment,

there was no sound, just that feeling of some one near.

She reached her arm out of the door, touched the button, and, in an instant, had flooded the hall with light.

As she did so she saw a man turn and run down the three steps near the window, part way up the stairs.

The window was open! Cora was too frightened to move for a moment, then she raised her revolver, and the next instant the sound of a shot rang through the house.

The man dropped out of the window.

Cora ran to it, looked down, saw the figure on the ground beneath, and fired again, but not at the man.

With a cry the fellow jumped up, and as he hurried away Cora saw that he limped. She must have hit him!

In all this time she could not give a word to the three frightened girls who were screaming and shouting for help. Nettie had run down from the third floor, Belle was threatening to die, and Bess was doing her best to make the boys down at the bungalow hear her cries.

"Did you kill him?" gasped Belle, when Cora finally returned to the bedroom.

"No, indeed, but I guess I hurt him a little. He limped off rather unsteadily. I had no idea of hitting him, but just as I fired toward the window he darted into it. I could not help it. He should have surrendered."

Cora was as pale as death. Her black hair fell in a cloud about her shoulders. She sank into a chair and still held the smoking weapon.

"Put that down!" commanded Nettie.

"Not yet—he might come back," murmured Cora. "There is no reason for you to fear, it is not cocked," and she held up the revolver to prove her words.

"Oh, do put it down!" begged Belle.

"Seems to me you are more afraid of the revolver than of the burglar," remarked Cora. "Do you realize that a man has just jumped out of the window?"

"Of course we do," wailed Bess, "but we don't want any more things to happen, and it's always the perfectly safe, unloaded guns that shoot people."

"Oh, I'll put it away, if you feel so about it," and Cora stepped over to the dresser as she spoke. "I really hope I have not hurt the man very much!"

"Couldn't have, when he was able to get away,"

declared Nettie. "But I just wish you had! The idea of a mean man sneaking around here! Likely he's taken the silver. I didn't bring it up last night!"

"Well, that was not your fault, Nettie," Bess said. "We had so much excitement last night you are not responsible. Besides, you wanted to go down for it, and I said not to bother. But I hope he didn't take grandma's spoons."

"Let's go down and find out," suggested Cora.

"Oh, mercy, no!" cried Belle, who all the time continued to shiver under the bed clothes. "Let the old silver go—grandma's spoons and all the rest. We may be thankful we are alive."

"But the man is gone," declared Cora. "I saw him go."

"Yes, but there might be another man down stairs. Who knows anything about such persons or their doings?"

"Again I'll agree, if it makes you feel better," replied Cora. "But, you see, mother has been away so much, and Jack is always at college, so that I am rather educated in this sort of thing," and as she glanced at her watch on the dresser the other girls could not help admiring her prudent courage.

"What time is it?" asked Nettie.

"The mystic hour—when we are supposed to be farthest from earth," replied Cora. "Just two."

"There is no use in trying to sleep any more," said Bess. "We might better get up and dress."

"And look like valentines in the morning! No, indeed, I am going to bed," and Cora deliberately dropped herself down beside Belle.

"Oh, Nettie will keep guard," said Bess, apparently disappointed that Cora should give up her part of the "guarding."

"Strange, the neighbors did not hear the shots," the maid said. "But it is just as well. We might have had to entertain people more troublesome than burglars. I'm going down stairs. I must look about the spoons. Mrs. Robinson will be so angry——"

"You will do nothing of the sort, Nettie!" commanded Belle, sitting bolt upright. "I tell you we must all stick together until morning. I won't consent to any one leaving the room!"

Even Bess laughed, the order was so peremptory. Nettie fussed around rather displeased. Finally she asked if the young ladies wanted anything, and learning that they did not made her way upstairs.

"If you are to stay in this room, Bess," said

Cora, "please get some place. I want to put out the light."

"Oh, we must leave the light burning," insisted Belle.

"Must we? Very well," and Cora drew a light coverlet over her eyes. "Good night, or good morning, girls. Let me sleep while I may. Who knows but the officers will be after me in the morning!"

Bess dropped down upon the couch in the corner. Both twins had unlimited confidence in Cora, and as the time wore on they both felt, as she did, that there was no longer need for alarm.

"She's actually asleep," said Belle quietly.

"Good girl," replied Bess. "Wish I was. I hate to be awake."

"But some one has to watch," said the sister.

"What for?"

"He might come back."

"With a ball in his leg, or somewhere? Not much danger. Cora was plucky, and we were lucky. There! a rhyme at this hour! Positively dissipation!"

"I am glad mother was not at home," whispered Belle. "Of course, that was the man who has been sneaking around."

"Likely."

"Did Cora say so?"

"No, not just so, but she said she saw him."

"Do you suppose they will say anything about her shooting him?" (This in a hissed whisper.)

"Belle?"

"What, dear?"

"I must—go to—sleep!"

"Then I must stay awake. Some one has to watch!"

CHAPTER VII

THE SEARCH

THE spoons were gone!

Nettie discovered this very early the next morning, for the truth was, the maid did not return to sleep after the escape of the burglar from the Robinson cottage.

The fact that she had been intrusted with the care of the table silver, during the absence of Mrs. Robinson, gave the girl grave anxiety, and, although Bess was willing to say it was partly her fault that the silver had not been brought upstairs that night, Nettie felt none the less guilty.

The boys, Ed and Jack, were around at the cottage before the tired girls had a chance to collect themselves after breakfast.

"We have got to make a quiet search first," said Jack, after hearing the story. "No use putting the officers on until we get a look over the neighborhood. From Cora's version of the affair he could not have gone very far."

This was considered good advice, and accordingly Jack went back to the bungalow for Walter, so that all three chums might start out together.

"Did you really get a look at him?" Ed asked Cora.

"Not exactly a look," replied Cora, "but I noticed when he jumped up into the window that he wore a beard—he looked almost like a wild man."

"Naturally he would look to you that way, under the circumstances," said Ed, "but what stumps me is how you expected him—how you had the gun loaded and all that."

"Well, didn't he prowl around the very first day we came in from leaving mother at the train? He seemed to know we would be alone," declared Belle. "I hope he is so badly hurt that he had to——"

"Give up prowling," finished Cora. "Well, I hope he is not badly hurt. It is not pleasant to feel that one has really injured another, even if he be a bold, bad burglar."

"Don't let that worry you," encouraged Ed. "I rather guess his legs are used to balls and bullets. But here come the fellows. So long, girls," as he started off to meet Walter and Jack. "If we don't get the spoons we will get something."

"Where are they going?" asked Bess.

"Oh, I am so nervous and tired out this morning!" and Belle's white face corroborated that statement. "I feel I will have to go back to bed."

"It's the best thing you can do," advised Cora, for, indeed, the dainty, nervous Belle was easily overcome. "I might say, though, go out on the porch and rest in the hammock. The air will help."

Nettie was already searching and beating the ground from under the hall window out into the field, and then into the street. She had found one spoon, and she had also found a spot that showed where some one had lately been lying in the tall grass.

Cora joined her now, and the two came to the conclusion that the man had rested there possibly to do something for the injured foot or leg.

"It is well you found even one spoon," said Cora, bending low in the bushes to make sure there were no more dropped there, "for that will help in identifying the others."

"But I do feel dreadfully," sighed Nettie. "I have been with Mrs. Robinson so long, and nothing of the kind has ever before happened."

"There has to be a first time," said Cora, "and I am sure Mrs. Robinson will not blame you."

"Only for you what might have happened," exclaimed the girl, looking into Cora's flushed face. "I cannot see how you ever had the courage to fire!"

"I had to! Think of three helpless girls—and a desperate man. Why, if I showed fright, I am sure we might have all been chloroformed or something. Why, what's this? I declare! a chloroform bottle! There! And it's from the town drug store! Well, now, wasn't it lucky I had the revolver?" She picked up a small phial.

"Don't tell Miss Bess or Miss Belle," cautioned Nettie. "They are so nervous now, I think they would not stay in the house another night if they knew about the bottle."

"All right," agreed Cora, "but it will be well for the boys to know about it. It shows that the man went to the Spray drug store, and that he must belong about here some place."

Meanwhile, Ed, Jack and Walter had done considerable searching. They followed what they took to be a trail, down over the railroad tracks, through swamps, and they finally brought up at an abandoned gypsy camp!

"They left in a hurry," declared Ed. "See, they had a meal here last night, at least."

The remains of food and of a campfire showed

that his surmise was correct, and Jack made bold enough to pull down an old horse blanket that hung to the ground from the low limbs of a tree. "Hello! Who are you?" exclaimed Jack, for back of the improvised curtain lay a man asleep!

The other boys ran to the spot.

"That's him," whispered Ed, ignoring his education. "Look at the bandaged foot!"

The man turned over and growled. He was not asleep, but pretended to be, or wanted to be.

"Here!" exclaimed Ed, giving him a shove, "wake up! We want those spoons you borrowed last night!"

The fellow pulled himself up on his arms and made a move as if to get something in his pocket, but the boys were too many and too quick for him.

Ed and Walter had his arms secure before he had a chance to sit upright. Jack whipped out a strap, and while the fellow vigorously protested and exerted a desperate effort to free himself, the young men made him their prisoner.

"You stay here, and I will go for the officer," said Jack, having tied fast the man's hands and noting that the sore foot would not permit of any running away.

"What do you want?" shouted the man. "If you don't let me go, I'll——"

"Oh, no, you won't," interrupted Ed.

"A nice chap to break in on a couple of girls! Even robbers should have some honor," and Ed pushed the man back into the grass just to relieve his feelings.

"I didn't do no breaking in," said the fellow, turning in pain. "I got kicked with a horse."

"A little iron broncho," remarked Walter, with a smile. "Well, that sort of kick stays a while. I guess you won't feel like running after that horse. Did he run away?"

The man looked as if he would like to strangle Walter, but he was forced to lie there helpless.

Jack had gone. The officer, after hearing the story, decided to ask Cora to go to the swamp to identify the man. With this intention the two stopped at the cottage, and Cora promised to hurry along after them down to the abandoned camp.

"I can't go this very minute," she said, "but I know the way. I will follow directly."

"No need to go into the woods," said the officer, on second thought. "Just step down to the station house. We will have him there inside of half an hour."

This was agreed upon, and when Jack and the constable had gone toward the camp, Cora, without telling Bess or Belle, who did not happen to see the man with Jack, slipped into a linen outing suit and started for the country police station.

The road led cross-cut through a lot. There were trees in the very heart of this big meadow, and when Cora reached a clump of birches she was suddenly startled to see an old woman shuffling after her. Cora stopped instantly. It was broad daylight, so she had no thought of fear.

"What do you want?" she demanded of the woman, whom she saw was an old gypsy.

"I—want—you, young lady!" almost hissed the woman. "Do not get Salvo into trouble!" and she raised a black and withered hand in warning, "or trouble shall be upon your head!"

"Salvo!"

"Tony Salvo! Liza has spoken!" and the old gypsy turned away, after giving Cora a look such as the young girl was not apt soon to forget.

But Cora went straight on to the police station.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

CORA was pale and frightened. Jack and Ed had already reached the office of the country squire, where that official had taken the sulky prisoner. Walter went back to the cottage to assure the young girls there that everything would ultimately be all right.

From under dark, shaggy eyebrows the man stared at Cora. He seemed to know of the gypsy woman's threat, and was adding to it all the savagery that looks and scowls could impart. But Cora was not to be thus intimidated—to give in to such lawbreakers.

"Do you recognize the prisoner?" asked the officer.

"As well as I can tell from the opportunity I had of seeing him," replied the girl, in a steadied voice.

"What about him do you remember?"

"The beard, and the fact that he is lame. I must have hit him when I fired to give the alarm."

The man looked up and smiled. "Humph!" he grunted, "fired—to give—the alarm!"

"Pretty good firing, eh?" demanded the squire. "Now, Miss Kimball, please give us the whole story."

Again the man cast that swift, fierce look at Cora, but her eyes were diverted from him.

"The first time I saw him—I think it was he—was one evening when we were returning from a motor ride. I saw a man creeping around the cottage. He had that peculiar stoop of the shoulders."

"He's got that, all right," agreed the squire.

"The next time I saw the person, whom I take to be this man, was last night, about midnight. I was aroused from sleep, and upon making a light in the hall I saw a man under the window. The next moment he jumped out, and again I saw the figure under the window."

Cora paused. Somehow she felt unreasonably nervous, but the strain of the night's excitement might account for that.

"What have you got to say for yourself, Tony?" asked the squire.

"Not guilty," growled the man. "I was at the

camp last night, and when the old folks were packing up I got kicked with that big bay horse. Ouch!" and he rubbed the injured leg.

"Looks funny, though, doesn't it, Tony?"

Jack and Ed were talking to Cora. "If you have finished with us, Squire Redding, we will leave," said Ed. "My sister is not used to this sort of thing."

"Certainly, certainly," agreed the squire politely. "I am much obliged for her testimony. I guess we will hold Tony for the grand jury. Gypsies in this county have to be careful, or they lose their rights to come in here. I think, myself, we would be better off without them."

"Then give me a chance to leave," snapped the man. "The rest are gone. We are done with this blamed county, anyhow."

"Well, you will have to settle up first," declared Squire Redding. "Those spoons were valuable."

"I ain't got no spoons! I tell you I was at the camp all night, and I don't know nothin' about this thing."

"Very well, very well. Can you furnish a thousand-dollar bond?"

"Thousand-dollar bond!" and the gypsy shifted uneasily. "I guess not, judge."

"Then here comes the man to attend to your case. Constable Cummings, take this man to the station again and lock him up. Here, Tony, you can walk all right. Don't play off that way."

But Tony did not move. He sat there defiant.

Officer Cummings was a big man and accustomed to handling prisoners as rough and as ugly as this one. The two steel cells back of the fire house were often occupied by rough fishermen and clammers who forgot the law at the seaside place, and it was always Tom Cummings who put them in "the pen."

"Come, Tony," he said, with a flourish of his stick. "I never like to hit a gypsy; it's bad luck."

The prisoner looked up at big Tom. Then he shuffled to his feet and shambled out of the room.

As he passed down the stone steps he brushed past Cora. Whether intentionally or otherwise, the man shoved the girl so that she was obliged to jump down at the side of the step. Jack saw it and so did Ed, but big Tom winked at them and merely hurried the prisoner along. Cora only smiled. Why should the man not be rude when her evidence had accused him of a serious crime—that of breaking and entering?

"I didn't tell you about the bottle," she said to the boys as they walked along. "I found this bottle in the fields."

"Chloroform!" exclaimed Jack. "You should have told the judge, Cora."

"But could I prove that the man had it? Besides, it would be awful to have that made public."

"You are right, Cora," agreed Ed. "First thing we'd know, it would be in the New York papers. 'Attempt to Chloroform Three Young Girls!' That would not be pleasant news for the folks up home way."

"Oh, well, I suppose you are right," said Jack. "But that bottle puts a different light on the case, and it seems to me the fellow ought to suffer for it."

"And do you know that old gypsy woman, Liza, met me and tried to scare me into—or out of—identifying Tony? She made a most dramatic threat."

"Did, eh? I thought all the gypsies had cleared out!" exclaimed Jack. "I'll go and get a warrant for her——"

"She took the eleven o'clock train," said Cora. "I saw her going to the station as I came up the street. Oh, I wouldn't bother with the poor old

woman. This man is her brother, and naturally she wants to keep him out of trouble."

"At the expense of trouble for others." Jack was determined to have justice for his sister. "I'm going to make sure she and the whole tribe have left the county. The lazy loafers!"

"Now, Jacky," and Ed smiled indulgently. "Didn't Liza tell your fortune once, and say that you were going to marry the proverbial butter tub? It is not nice of you to go back on a thing like that."

"Did it strike you, boys, that this man answers the description of the man Mrs. Robbins was frightened by?" asked Cora.

"That's so," agreed Ed. "I'll bet he had his eye on something around the bungalow—not Miss Robbins, of course."

"Well, it seems better that he is now safe," said Cora, with a sigh. "I'm glad I am through with it."

"I hope you are," said Ed. "and something in his manner caused Cora to remember that remark. "I hope you are!"

But Cora was not through with it by a great deal—as we shall soon see.

CHAPTER IX

THE START

"DEAR me! I did think something else would happen to prevent us from getting off," said Bess, as she and Belle, with Cora, actually started out to get the autos ready for the tour to the Berkshires. "And to think that Miss Robbins can go with us!"

"I'm sure she will be a lot better than a nervous person like dear mamma," said Belle. "Not but what we would love to have mamma go, but she does not enjoy our kind of motoring."

"It does seem fortunate that Miss Robbins wanted to go," added Cora. "I like her; she is the ideal type of business woman."

"Is she?" asked Belle, in such an innocent way that the other two girls laughed outright.

"Oh, I suppose I ought to know," and Belle pouted; "but we always think Cora knows so much better—and more."

"Which is another fact I have bumped into," said Cora

"I just feel that we are going to have the jolliest of good times," remarked Bess, as they started down the road. "I never care what route we take. Isn't it fine that the boys attended to all that arrest and police business for us?"

"Very fine," agreed Cora, "but I like to have *my* say now about our plans. We are going to take the main road along the New York side. We will touch Bridgeport and Waterbury. You might like to know that much."

"There are the boys, and there is Miss Robbins! My, doesn't she look smart!" suddenly exclaimed Bess.

"That's a smart outfit," Cora agreed, as they saw the party approaching, Miss Robbins "done up" in a tan suit, with the exact shade in a motor cap.

"I'm so glad we have all the things in the cars. It is so much better to do that the night before," remarked Belle.

"But *you* didn't do it the night before; I did!" her sister reminded her.

"Did you bring the hot-water bottle?" asked Cora. "If Belle gets a headache, you will surely need it."

This was not a joke, neither was it intended for sarcasm, for on previous tours Belle had suffered,

and the getting of reliable remedies was one of the real discomforts of the trip.

"I put in the water bag and mustard, too," said Belle. "Bess is just as likely as not to get a cold, and she has to have mustard."

"I suppose Cora brought cold cream," called Bess, with a laugh. "That is usually the important drug in her medicine chest."

"I did," admitted Cora. "I will surely have to use a barrel of it going through the changes in the hills. I cannot stand a stinging face."

Mrs. Robinson had taken a notion that her twins were outgrowing their twinship, consequently their outfits for the mountain trip had been made exactly alike in material and effect. The result was, the boys purposely mixed the girls up, asking Belle what made her so thin, for instance, when they knew perfectly well that she was always thin, and that it was Bess who had to own to being stout.

The twins' costumes were of hunter-green corduroy, with knitted green caps. Cora wore mole-color cloth, with a toque to match, and as they now stood before the garage, waiting the coming of the others, who had stopped at the post office, many admiring eyes turned in their direction.

"They have a lot of mail," remarked Cora

gleefully, as Jack waved letters and cards to her. "I hope it is nothing we don't want just now."

"As long as the gypsy man is safe, we needn't fear anything unpleasant," said Bess, "but I did feel a lot better when I heard that they took him to the real county jail."

"Oh, yes," and Cora laughed. "You seemed to think that man was our particular evil genius. Bess, all gypsies are supposed to steal."

"Hello!"

"Here we are!"

"Everybody and everything!"

"No, Wallie forgot his new handkerchief—the one with the pretty rose in the corner."

"And Jacky forgot his rope. We won't be able to haul him this time."

"I forgot something," began Miss Robbins, "my absorbent cotton. See to it that if you must get hurt you don't get——"

"The nose-bleed," Ed finished more practically than eloquently.

Miss Robbins was to travel in Cora's car, with Cora and Hazel Hastings. The boys had tried to alter this plan, they declaring one boy, at least, should go in the big car, but Cora argued that the *Whirlwind* was distinctly a girl's auto, and only girls should travel in it. This put Jack in his own

runabout and Walter and Ed in the *Comet.* The Robinson girls, of course, were not to be separated, as the *Flyaway* seemed to know all about the twins, and the twins knew all about the *Flyaway.*

The weather was uncertain, and the fog horn at the point lighthouse had blown all night, so that the girls were naturally apprehensive. Only Cora's car was canopied, so that should it rain they would be obliged to stop and wait for clear weather.

Nevertheless it was a very jolly party that now waited at the garage for the machines to be run out. The boys went inside and attended to the very last of the preparations, while Cora, too, insisted upon looking over her machine before starting off.

"You'll have a fine trip," remarked the man at the garage. "I think the run through the Berkshires one of the best there is. Fine roads and nice people along the way."

"Well, we need both," answered Miss Robbins. "I don't know so much about roads, but people—we always need them."

"All aboard," cried Ed, as finally they all did get into the cars, and, as usual, the *Whirlwind*

led. Next came the *Flyaway,* then the two runabouts with the young men.

"What a fine chauffeur Miss Cora is?" remarked Miss Robbins to Hazel.

"Yes, but you must call her Cora," corrected Hazel gayly. "We make it a rule to go by first names when we like people."

"Then you must call me Regina," added Miss Robbins. "I hope the young men don't make me Reggie."

"They're very apt to," commented Hazel.

Cora had thrown in the third speed, and was now bending over her wheel in real man fashion. They were getting out on the country roads, where all expected to make good time. Bess also threw on her full speed, following Cora's lead, and the boys, of course, gave the speeding signal on their horns.

"My!" exclaimed Miss Robbins admiringly, as the landscape flashed by.

"Can't we go," added Hazel exultingly.

"It's like eating and drinking the atmosphere," continued the young lady physician.

"I do love autoing," went on Hazel. "My brother is a perfect devotee of the machine. But we do not happen to own one of our own."

"That is where good friends come in," said Miss Robbins. "This trip is a perfect delight to me. And, really, it will fix me up wonderfully for what I have to undertake this fall. You see, we have just closed the bungalow, mother has gone home, and that left me free to go to the Berkshires and have a little pleasure, together with attending to some business. I have a very old patient there. I have to call on her before she leaves the hills."

"And you really have patients?" Hazel looked in surprise at the young woman beside her.

"Of course, I do. But this one I inherited—she is a great aunt of mine."

Hazel leaned forward to ask Cora what her speedometer was registering.

"Only twenty miles an hour," replied Cora. "And we could go thirty easily. But I don't fancy ripping off a shoe, or doing any other of the things that speed might do."

"I shall enjoy it all the more when I am so sure of that," spoke Regina. "I cannot see why people take risks just for the sake of——"

"Hey, there!" shouted Ed, as his car shot past Cora's. "We are going on ahead."

"So—we—see!" answered Cora dryly.

"What do you suppose they are up to?" asked

Bess, as she turned the *Flyaway* up to the side of the *Whirlwind.*

"Haven't any idea," replied Cora, just as Jack, too, shot by.

"See you later," called Jack.

"Not deserting us, are they?" asked Regina.

"Oh, no, just some lark," answered Cora.

But scarcely had the boys' machines disappeared than a trail of three gypsy wagons turned into the mountain highway from some narrow crossroad.

"Oh!" sighed Belle, apprehensively clutching the arm of her sister.

"Don't, Belle. You almost turned me into the *Whirlwind,"* cautioned the sister, as she quickly twisted around the steering wheel.

"Those are the beach gypsies," Cora was able to say to Bess.

Then no one spoke. Bess leaned over her wheel, while Cora looked carefully for a place to turn out that would bring her clear of the rumbling old wagons.

A woman sat in the back of one of the vehicles. She poked her head out and glared at the approaching machines. Then she was seen to wave a red handkerchief so that the persons in the next wagon could distinctly see it.

The motor girls also saw it.

This caused some confusion, as the motorists were trying to get out in the clear road, while the wagons were blocking the way.

Then, just as the *Whirlwind* was about to pass the second wagon, the driver halted his horse and stepped down directly in her path. He waved for Cora to stop.

"Don't!" called Miss Robbins, and Cora shot by, followed closely by Bess, who turned on more gas.

The gypsy wagons had all stopped in the middle of the road.

The automobiles were now safely out of the wanderers' reach.

"That was the time a chaperon counted," said Cora, "for I had not the slightest fear of stopping. I thought he might just want to ask some ordinary question."

"You are too brave," said Miss Robbins. "It is not particularly interesting to stop on a road like this to talk to gypsies when our boys are out of reach."

"We must speed up and reach them," said Cora. "I might meet more gypsies."

Belle was thoroughly frightened. Hazel did not know what to make of the occurrence, but to Cora and to Bess, who had so lately learned

something of queer gypsy ways, the matter looked more serious, now that there was time to think of it.

"There they are!" shouted Bess, as she espied the two runabouts stopped at the roadside.

"They are getting lunch," said Hazel. "Look at Jack putting down the things on the grass."

"They certainly are," confirmed Cora. "Now, isn't that nice of them? And we have been blaming them for deserting us!"

Neither the motor girls nor the motor boys knew what the meeting of the gypsy wagons was about to lead to—serious trouble for some of the party.

CHAPTER X

AN EXPLOSION

THE rain came. It descended in perfect sheets, and only the fact that our tourists could reach a mountain house saved them from more inconvenience than a wetting.

They had just partaken of a very agreeable lunch by the roadside, all arranged and prepared by the boys, with endless burned potatoes down on the menu as "fresh roasted," when the lowering clouds gave Dame Nature's warning. Next the thunder roared about what it might do, and then our friends hurried away from the scene. The run brought them some way on the direct road to the Berkshires, and in one of those spots where it would seem the ark must have tipped, and dropped a human being or two, the young people found a small country community.

The special feature of this community was not a church, nor yet a meeting house, but a well-

equipped hotel, with all the requisites and perquisites of a first-class hostelry.

"No more traveling to-day," remarked Cora, as, after a wait of two hours, she ventured to observe the future possible weather. "It looks as if it would rain all there was above, and then start in to scoop up some from the ocean. Did you ever see such clouds?"

Ed said he had not. Walter said he did not want to, while the girls didn't just know. They wanted to be off, and hoped Cora's observations were not well-founded.

Miss Robbins found in the hotel a sick baby to take up her time, and she inveigled Bess into helping her, while the wornout and worried mother took some rest. The little one, a darling girl of four years, had taken cold, and had the most troublesome of troubles—an earache—so that she cried constantly, until Miss Robbins eased the pain.

When the boys realized what a really good doctor the girls' chaperon was, they all wanted to get sick in bed, Jack claiming the first "whack."

But Walter had some claim on medical attendance, for when the storm was seen to be coming up he had eaten more stuff from the lunch basket than just one Walter could comfortably store

away, and the headache that followed was not mere pretense.

So the rainy afternoon at Restover Hotel was not idle in incident. It was almost tea time when Cora had a chance to speak with her brother privately. She beckoned him to a corner of the porch where the rain could not find them; neither could any of their friends.

"Jack," she began, "do you know that the people in the gypsy wagon really did try to stop us? All that prattle of Bess and Belle was not nonsense. Only for Miss Robbins I should have stopped."

"Well, what's the answer?" asked her brother.

"That's just what I would like to find out," replied the sister. "It seems to me they would hardly have stopped a couple of girls to ask road directions or anything like that, when so many wagons, easier to halt than automobiles, had also passed by them."

"Maybe they wanted some gas—gasoline. They use that in their torches."

"But why ask girls for it?" insisted Cora.

"Because girls are supposed to be soft, and they might give it. Catch a fellow giving anything to a gypsy!"

"Well, that might be so, but I have a queer

feeling about that old witch's threat. She looked like three dead generations mummified. Her eyes were like sword points."

"She must have been a beaut. I should like to have met her witchship. But, Cora dear, don't worry. We boys are not going to run away again, and if we see the gypsies we will see them first and last."

"But there are bands of them all over the hills, and I have always heard that they have some weird way of notifying each band of any important news in the colony. Now, you see, Jack, the arrest of that man would be very important to them. They are as loyal to each other as the royalty."

"Nevertheless it is a good thing the fellow is landed, and it was a blessing that he went for the cottage instead of to Miss Robbins' bungalow. *They* had no means of calling help," mused Jack.

"I suppose it was," answered Cora. "But I tell you, I do not want another such experience. It was all right while I had to act, but when it was all over I had to——"

"React! That's the trouble. What we do with nerve we must repeat without nerve. Now, what do you think of your brother as a public

lecturer?" and Jack laughed at his own attempt to explain the reaction that Cora really felt.

"My, wasn't that a bright stroke of lightning?" exclaimed Cora. "Listen! Something is struck!"

"That's right!"

"An explosion!"

A terrific report followed the flash. Then cries and shrieks all over the hotel alarmed those who were not directly at the scene of the panic.

"Oh, it's the kitchen! See the smoke!"

Jack and Cora rushed indoors, their first anxiety being to make sure that all the girls and boys of their party were safe.

"Where is Bess?"

"Where is Belle?"

"Where are Walter and Ed?"

"Oh! where is Miss Robbins?"

Every one was looking for some one. In the excitement the guests at the hotel were rushing about shouting for friends and relatives, while smoke, black and heavy, poured up the stairs from the basement.

Jack, Ed and Walter were among the first to get out and use the fire extinguishers. There were plenty of these about the hotel, but on account of the injury to the men who were working in the kitchen at the time of the explosion, and owing

to the fact that all the guests in the hotel just then were girls and women, the men having gone to the city, there really were not enough persons to cope with the flames that followed the lightning.

"Quick!" shouted Cora, "we can get the buckets. Bess take that one," pointing to the pail that hung on the wall, and which was filled with water. "Belle, run around and find another! Regina is with the injured men, so we cannot have her, but there is a girl! Won't you please get a bucket from the hall?" this to a very much frightened young lady. "The fire extinguishers seem to be all emptied, and the men are beating back the flames from the stairway."

In a remarkably short time more than a dozen frightened girls and women had formed a bucket brigade under Cora's direction, and as fast as they could get the pails they handed them, filled and again refilled, to the boys, who were now doing all in their power to keep the fire from spreading to the dining-room floor.

"What happened?" demanded one woman, when Jack turned to take a pail of water from Cora.

"Lightning struck the boiler," replied the young man.

"Oh, mercy!" exclaimed the same unreasonable person, who was delaying the men with her questions. "Any one hurt?"

"Yes, three," and Jack, his shirt sleeves rolled up, and looking like the earnest worker he was, dashed again down a step into the dense smoke to splash the pail of water on the smouldering but now well-wetted woodwork.

It seemed then as if all the guests but our own friends had run out of the building, and were huddled on the porch or standing in the rain under the trees along the path.

Ed and Walter had carried the cook and the dishwasher out from the kitchen immediately after the explosion of the boiler, and the other injured ones were in the little cottage adjoining the hotel, where Miss Robbins was binding up their burns and making good use of her skill and the materials that she carried in her emergency case.

"But I am afraid this man is very dangerously injured," she told Ed. "A piece of the boiler struck him directly on the back of the head."

"Should he go to the hospital?" asked the young man.

"Without question, if he could. But this is so far from anything like a hospital."

"We could take him to Waterbury in Cora's car," suggested Ed. "That is large enough to make him somewhat easy."

"The very thing! But I could not go with him. This other man is suffering so," and she poured more oil on the face that had not yet been bandaged in cotton.

"Cora could run the machine, and I could hold Jim—they say his name is Jim."

"Poor Jim!" sighed the young lady doctor. "He has a very slight chance. See, he is unconscious!"

Ed rushed out, and in a short time had the *Whirlwind* at the door. Jack and Walter were still busy with the fire, but they stopped when he called them, and together all three carried Jim tenderly out, and when Ed got in first they put the man in his arms. Cora also had been summoned, and without as much as waiting for her cap, but, getting into the cloak that Bess threw from the hall rack, she cranked up, and was at the wheel, following the directions for the nearest way to a hospital in Waterbury.

"It is his only chance," remarked Miss Robbins, when she heard some one say the jolting of the auto would kill him outright, "and both the car and its chauffeur can be depended upon."

CHAPTER XI

THE RESULT OF A BLAZE

"THAT was plucky, Cora."

"What, Ed?"

"You running into Waterbury with a man who might have died in your car."

"Then he would have died in your arms."

"But I thought girls were so queer about things of that sort. When one dies in a house, for instance, a girl never likes the room——"

"But you would have had to keep your arms. Ed, I think the pluck was all on your side. But I do hope Jim has a chance. He seems an awfully frail little fellow."

"Weighs about as much as you do, I should judge. But they say that kind of build is the best for fighting disease—there is not so much blood to take up the poison."

They were riding back to Restover. Ed insisted upon driving the car, although Cora declared that she was not the least tired. The trip

to the hospital had been made at a very high rate of speed, as the unconscious man seemed in imminent danger, and Cora's hands now trembled visibly from their work at the wheel of the *Whirlwind.*

"I suppose we will have to live on love tonight," remarked Ed, "for that kitchen is certainly a thing of the past."

"What saved the second floor?"

"The heavy beams and metal ceiling. I guess they have had fires before in that hotel, for the ceiling was practically of iron. I just wonder what the boys are doing about now. I fancy Walter has turned nurse to assist Miss Robbins."

"And Jack has taken up the role of engineer—to be made chief of the fire department. I shouldn't wonder but what they had formally organized by this time."

"He certainly deserves to be chief; he did good work. When a gas tank—a small affair—started to hiss in the servants' dining room, Jack grabbed up a big palm and dumped the contents of the flower pot into the tank. It was a small thing they heated coffee on, and when, the next moment, the tank broke it was surprised to find itself buried under a bed of sand, with flowers on the grave."

Cora laughed heartily at Ed's telling of the incident. Certainly strange things, if not really funny things, always seem to occur during the excitement caused by fire.

"If everything in the kitchen is gone, don't you think we had better bring back some refreshments?" asked Cora. "The folks will all have appetites when they find there is nothing to eat."

"Great idea. Here is a good-looking store. Let's load up."

"But is there no manager at the hotel? Who was or who is boss?"

"Jim. The management of that sort of place goes into the shape of bills and accounts, settled every month. Some New York company owns the place. It was a failure, and they leased it to a local man. That's why there will be no one to look after things now."

"Well, we will buy the food and send our bill in to the company. I guess they will be glad enough to pay it when they hear of the emergency."

"Yes, it would not do for the hotel disaster to get into the New York papers, with a starved-to-death head. Well, here's our store. What shall we buy?"

Cora and Ed left the car and went into the

store. They bought all sorts of canned goods, although Cora declared they would have to be eaten raw. Then they bought bacon and eggs. Ed insisted on that, no matter, he said, if they had to come to town again and take back to Restover a gas stove. He insisted that no well-regulated emergency feed ever went without bacon and eggs. Bread and butter they procured for fifty persons. Some cake for the ladies, Ed suggested. Pork and beans, canned, Cora thought might do for breakfast, even if they had to be eaten from the cans. Then the last thought, and by no means the most trifling, was wooden plates and tin cups. The bill footed up to ten dollars, and Ed insisted that the man make out the bill as paid and marked for the Restover Hotel.

A half hour later the *Whirlwind* drew up to the hostelry.

The rain had ceased, and the hotel patrons were almost all out of doors, so that the motor girls and boys trooped down to meet Ed and Cora.

As was anticipated, hunger prevailed, and when it was found that stores of eatables were in the tonneau of the *Whirlwind* even the most helpless, nervous ladies at the hotel wanted to help get the refreshments into the house.

"But where can they be cooked?"

"What can we cook on?"

"There is no gas stove!"

"Not even an oil stove!"

"We can't eat bacon raw!"

"The bread is all right, anyway!"

Such was the volley of remarks that came out from the crowd.

"We will manage somehow," said Cora. "Our boys are used to emergency work in the line of eating and fixing meals."

"Seems ter me," whined a wizen old lady, "thet the girls knows somethin' about it, too!"

In the dining room on the second floor were two chandeliers. Under these were, of course, tables, and before the anxious ones had time to settle their fears there stood on these tables Cora, Bess and Belle, and on the other Ed, Jack and Walter. Each of our friends had in his or her hand something that answered to the pan or pot brand of utensil, and in the pan or pot, which was held over the gas, was something that began to "talk-talk" out loud of good things to eat, sizzling and crisping.

It was very funny to see the young folks cooking over the handsome chandeliers, from which, of course, the glass globes had been removed.

"Well, did you ever!" exclaimed more than one.

"Those young folks do beat all! I used to think ma and pa brung us up right, but whoever on earth would have cooked bacon and eggs over a lamp," ejaculated an old man.

"I guess driving them machines makes them smart," said another guest, as she took the pan Cora handed down and gingerly slopped the stuff over on a wooden plate. "I guess it is a good thing to know how to drive an automobile. Makes you right smart! Whew! but that was hot!" and she put the overheated fingers into her mouth.

"Put another dish over it to keep it hot," Cora ordered. "And can't some one set a table? That is not such a difficult thing to do."

"See here!" called out Ed, "this is no pancake party. I am not going to stay up here cooking all night. I am going down to eat. We have enough of tomatoes warmed to fill the wash bowl, and I love canned tomatoes if they *are* out of a washbowl. We washed the bowl, and sterilized it, and it's as good as a soup tureen."

There stood the white wash basin almost filled with the steaming tomatoes. As Ed said, there could be no objection to the crockery.

Jack had charge of the water for tea. This

took a long time to boil, owing to the fact that the kettle was a very much bent-up affair that had been rescued from the ruined kitchen.

Bess was cooking canned peas, while Belle insisted that all she could do was to turn over, with a fork, the things that cooked nicely on Cora's pan.

"Done to a turn!" announced Jack, as he jumped down with his pots. "Now, if you folks need any more you will really have to go into active service."

His initiative was followed by the others, and presently the less timid of the guests had put food into pans and taken up their places on the tables to do their cooking, while it seemed that all at once every one "fell to" and procured something to eat.

"Let there be no unbecoming haste!" remarked Walter gently, but it was a great meal, that.

CHAPTER XII

QUEER COBBLERS

"Isn't she disappointing?" remarked Hazel.

"Very," answered Cora.

"To think that she should leave us for a patient!"

"I cannot understand it."

"I have heard that girls not home raised are like that—they have no sentiment."

"Nor honor, either!"

"Well, she didn't think she was bound to go with us, and, of course, there was money besides reputation in being on the spot when the hotel owners would arrive. But I am disappointed."

"I hope the boys will not feel obliged to return for her," and Cora's lip curled slightly. "She is such a good business woman she ought to be able to get to the Berkshires from here."

"Walter seems enthralled," and Hazel laughed. "I wonder how Jack got him to leave her?"

They were on the road again, and Miss Rob-

bins, the physician, the business woman, the chaperon, had stayed behind to take care of those who had been injured in the explosion. There were good doctors within call, but she simply would stay, and saw no reason why the girls should not go on alone. To her the idea of being obligated to them was not to be thought of when a matter like professional business came up. Of course, this was a general disappointment, for the girls would never have entrusted themselves to her patronage if they had not felt certain that she would keep her word with them. However, the fact was that they were on the road again, and Regina Robbins was happy on the sunny porch of the big hotel, incidentally attending to a cut or two on one man's face and a bad-looking burn on the arm of another.

Bess and Belle were driving along, "their faces as long as fiddles," as Cora said. The boys had taken the lead, and they were having their own trouble trying to convince Walter that Miss Robbins had "dumped" the girls, and that it was a "low-down trick."

The *Whirlwind* glided along apparently happy under the firm hand of its fair owner. The *Flyaway* seemed, too, to be glad of a chance to get away again, and as Bess threw in the third speed,

according to commands from Jack, who was leading, the little silver machine darted away like an arrow freed from the bow.

The day was wonderfully clear after the rain, and even the sunshine had been polished up by the scouring of the mighty storm of late summer.

"I shouldn't care so much," Belle confided to her twin sister, "but when we get to Lenox alone, without a chaperon, what will people say?"

"Well, Tinkle, we have not got there yet. Maybe we may pick up a chaperon between this and that."

"If we only could! Where do we stop tonight?"

"Wherever we get."

So they sped on. Mile after mile was lapped up in the dust of the motors. Out through Connecticut, over the line into Massachusetts, and along the splendid roads that border the Housatonic River.

Houses were becoming scarcer and fewer; it was now largely a matter of woodlands and roads.

"We have to make time now," called Cora to the twins. "The boys say we should get to Pittsfield by evening."

"To Pittsfield! Why, that's——"

"About a hundred," called Cora again. "Look

out for your shoes, and don't be reckless on the turns. Stripping your differential just now would be fatal."

"All right," responded Bess, "but mine is not the only car in the race."

"Thanks," called back Cora, "and now we will clear off. Good-by!"

The *Whirlwind* shot ahead. Jack's car was clear of the other—Walter's, and as the run had to be made against time it was best for each machine to have "room to look around it."

"Oh!" gasped Hazel, as Cora swerved around a sharp bend, "I don't fancy this sort of riding."

"But we have to get to a large town before night. It's all right. The roads are so clear."

On they flew. Only the shrieking of Jack's siren and the groaning of the deep horn on Walter's car gave messages to the girls.

Several miles were covered in silence, and then they came to a signboard. It told that the main road was closed, and that they must take to a side road—a highway that was fairly good, but much more lonely.

"I suppose we'll get back to the main road before a great while," said Cora.

"I hope so," returned Bess. "This looks dreadfully lonely, doesn't it?"

"Don't think about it," came from her sister.

On they went, the way becoming wilder each instant. Yet the road itself was fairly smooth, so that it was not necessary to slacken the speed of the cars.

"Something really smells hot," said Hazel. "Could anything ignite?"

"Not exactly," replied Cora, "but we don't want to get too hot. It makes trouble."

She slackened just a bit to make sure that Hazel's anxiety had no foundation in fact, for, indeed, the big machine was using its engine and gas to the utmost capacity.

Just ahead the glare of the *Comet* could be seen as it plunged into a deep turn in a deeper lined wood. Jack, in his *Get-There,* was after the first, and then the girls had difficulty even in getting a responding sound from the toots and the blasts which all were continually sounding.

"They are away ahead," said Bess. "I thought they had seen enough of getting too far away from us. How do we know but that we might meet the gypsies on this lonely road?"

"I wonder if it is late or early for motorists?" asked Cora of Hazel. "We haven't met a single party."

"Just happened so, I suppose," said Hazel.

"Surely people out here must enjoy this sort of weather."

"Listen!"

Cora gave three sharp blasts on her horn, but no answer came. "The boys are getting too far ahead.

"I will have to accelerate——," she called.

She pressed down the pedal and bent over the wheel as if urging the machine to its utmost. Then there was jolt—a roar! a bang! Cora jammed on brakes.

"A shoe is gone!" she cried. "Exploded!"

Without the slightest warning a big tire overheated, had ripped clear off the front wheel, the inner tube exploded, and the car had almost gone into a ditch when Cora stopped it.

Bess had seen the trouble, and was able to halt her car far enough away to avoid a collision.

"Isn't that dreadful!" cried Cora, her face as white as the tie at her throat. "It ripped off just from speed!"

"Can't it be fixed?" asked Hazel, who now was out beside Cora.

"Oh, of course! but how and when? I have another shoe, but to get it on, and the boys, as usual, out of sight!"

She had pulled off her gloves and was looking

at the split tire. It was marvelous that it should have come off so clean—simply peeled.

"And it's five o'clock," said Belle, with her usual unfortunate way of saying something to make things worse.

"But it isn't midnight," almost snapped Cora.

"Let's try to call the boys," suggested Belle. "Aren't they dreadful to get so far away?"

"Very rude," and Cora showed some sarcasm. "But the thing to do right now is not to wait for anybody, but to get to work. Bess, can you help me slip in a tube and put on a shoe?"

"I never have, but, of course, I'll try," and she, too, pulled off her gloves.

Cora quickly opened up the tool box, got out the jack, and then she unbuckled the shoe that was fast at the side of the *Whirlwind.*

"I always thought folks carried them to ornament the cars," said Hazel, with an attempt at good nature, "but it seems that a cobbler is the thing we ought to carry for an ornament. We really don't need him, but we do need new shoes."

"How long will it take?" asked Belle.

"There's no telling," replied Cora. "It isn't exactly like putting a belt on a sewing machine."

She handled the inner tube freely enough, and soon had it in the big rubber shoe, partly inflated.

"Easy as putting tape in a jelly bag," remarked Hazel.

"But we must get it on now and blow it up," said Cora. "Bess, get the pump."

The pump, was gotten, after which, with much exertion, the shoe was on the rim, and then the blowing began. This was not so easily accomplished as had been the other parts of the mechanical operation. First Bess pumped, then Belle tried it. Hazel was sure she could do it, for she often blew up Paul's bicycle, but this tire would not blow full.

The girls were rapidly losing their complexions. Such strenuous efforts!

"Oh, that's hard enough," declared Bess, trying to push her pretty fingers into the rubber.

"Yes," answered Cora, pressing on the tire, which sank with the pressure, "it's about as hard as rice pudding!"

"How many pounds?" insisted Bess.

Cora looked at the gauge. "Sixty. I have got to have a full ninety for this car."

"Then I don't see how we are going to get it!"

Cora did not heed the discouragement. She was pumping now, and the shoe was becoming rigid. "If I get it a little harder I'll call it done!" she panted, "though we may ditch the car next time."

"BUT WE MUST GET IT ON NOW AND BLOW IT UP," SAID CORA. "BESS, GET THE PUMP."

CHAPTER XIII

A DELAY AND A SCARE

IT WAS an hour later when the boys came back. They had discovered the loss of the girls when they had gone so far ahead that it took some time to return. The race was too much for them. They were obliged to admit that, in its interest, they had forgotten the girls.

"If Miss Robbins had been along, I fancy Walter would not have become so engrossed in the race," said Belle maliciously.

"Well, Miss Robbins was not along," replied Walter, with equal meaning.

"And what's more, Miss Robbins will *not* be along," spoke Cora. "I have heard of all sorts of things being permissible in the business world, but this, from a young lady, seems to be——"

"The utmost," admitted Jack. "But, sis, you must make allowances. We would dump Miss Robbins in the mountains, and likely crawl home

by train, while the hotel reputation will continue to reputate."

"Suppose we quit buzzing and get at the car," suggested Ed. "Seems, though, as if Cora had about fixed it up."

"I'm not so sure," said Cora eagerly. "I am afraid that there's something wrong other than the 'busted' tire. I was just about to look when you gentlemen returned. But will you please finish pumping first?"

Finally it was hard enough, and then Cora jumped into the car, while Jack cranked up. A noise that might have come from a distant sawmill rewarded the effort.

"A nut or a pin loose," suggested Walter, who now did what Jack called the "collar-button crawl" under the big car.

But that was only the beginning, and the end was that night came on and made faces at a very desolate party of young people, stalled miles from nowhere, with nothing but remorse of conscience to keep off the damp, night air.

Jack went around literally kicking himself, demanding to know whether they hadn't done the same thing before, and dumped those poor girls in a graveyard at midnight. When would boys learn that girls can't be trusted out of sight, and

so, while the boys are supposed to be the girls' brothers, these same brothers must forego sport of the racing brand?

Jack really felt the situation keenly. There was no way out of it, the girls could not get to a town even in the able-bodied cars, for Cora would no more leave her *Whirlwind* there in the darkness than she would have left Bess or Belle. Then, when it was proposed that one of the boys stay to guard the machine, and the others of the party go along to some place, the objection of "no Miss Robbins" robbed the distracted young men of their last argument.

"We will stay together," announced Cora. "At any rate, that will be better than some of us going to a hotel, and all that sort of thing. We can bunk in the cars."

"Oh, in the woods!" almost shrieked Belle.

"Well, no, *you* might go up a tree," said Cora rather crossly.

"There's many a nest unseen——"

"Wallie, you quit. The unseen nest is not for yours. You are hereby appointed for guard duty!" and Ed snatched up a stout stick to serve as "arms" for the guard.

"I have a little something," admitted Jack, flashing a brand new revolver. "I have heard of

the gypsy camps around these mountains, so I came prepared."

"Oh, those gypsies!" and Belle had another spasm. "I feel that something will happen tonight! Those dreadful gypsies!"

"We can lock you in the tonneau of Cora's car," suggested Ed, "and when the gypsies come they can't 'gyp' you. They may take all of us, but no power on earth, not even palm reading, can move that monster."

The idea that she really could be locked up in the car gave Belle some comfort, although Bess and Hazel were holding a most secret convention over under a tree, where the last rays of light lingered as day hurried along.

"Why did you speak about the gypsies?" Cora asked Jack, by way of reproof rather than question. "You know the girls go off in kinks when they think of the burglar."

"Well, I suppose I shouldn't. But the fact is, we might as well be prepared, for there are bands of our friends tied up around these hills. Fortune telling is a great business among summer idlers."

"Well, I hope we have seen the last of them. I'm going to stay in the open, in the *Flyaway*. I'd rather do it than be cooped up with the girls in the tonneau, and there will be room for Bess,

Belle and Hazel inside the *Whirlwind.* It won't be so bad—a night in the wide open."

"Oh, we fellows don't mind it, but, sis, might not some cocoon drop in your hair in the night? We had better rig up some sort of hood."

"My own hood will do nicely, and I am almost dead from the exertion of that tire. I grant you, I will not lie awake listening for gypsies."

"Then we boys will take turns on the picket," said Ed. "You can really depend upon us this time, girls. One will be awake and watching every minute."

"Oh, I'm sure it's all right out here," replied Cora. "What would any one want in these woods at night?"

"Might want fishing tackle," answered Walter. "Yes, I agree with thee, Edward; it is up to us to stay up to-night."

With this positive assurance, the young ladies proceeded to make themselves comfortable in their novel quarters. Cora curled up in the *Fly-away,* and the *Comet,* with Ed and Jack "sitting up in a lying-down posture," as they expressed it, was placed just where the young men could hear the girls whisper should any gypsies appear, or rather be scented. The first man to do picket duty, Walter, was in the *Get-There,* directly out

in the road, so that presently it seemed a night in the wide open might be a novelty rather than a misfortune.

Some time must have passed. Belle declared she was not asleep. Bess vowed she was still asleep. Hazel begged both girls to keep quiet, but the light of the gas lamps from the *Get-There* was bobbing about, and the flash of a new revolver was reflected in the night.

"What can be the matter?" sobbed Belle. "Oh, I knew we shouldn't stay in these dreadful woods."

"As if we could help it," complained her sister. "Belle, if you insist upon going on motor tours, why don't you try to get some sense?"

"All right, there!" called Jack, who now, with another headlight in hand, was looking under and about the *Whirlwind.*

"Yes! What's the matter?" answered and asked Bess.

"Nothing that we know of," replied Jack, "but Wallie thought he scented game, and we need something for breakfast."

"Goodness sakes! Likely a turtle or something," growled Bess, dropping her plump self down plumper than ever on the cushions.

"I don't believe it," objected Belle. "They

wouldn't wake us up for a turtle—or something."

"Make it a moose then," suggested Hazel. "Moose are plenty in New England, they say."

"With the horns?" asked Belle.

"With and without," replied Hazel. "But if you don't mind, I'm going out to join in the hunt. I have always longed for a real, live hunt."

"Oh, please don't," begged Belle. "It might be a man!"

"No such luck. There's Cora with her lamp. They are certainly after something," and with this she opened the tonneau door and went out with the others into the wild, dark, lonely night.

"I distinctly saw him," she heard Jack say. "Now, keep your nerve. Cora, where is the little gun?"

"I've got it," she replied. "I feel better with it. You boys have two."

"What is it?" asked Hazel, now thoroughly alarmed.

"A man!" whispered Cora. Walter saw him crawling around, and we are bound to find him. He is alone, that's sure, and there are seven of us."

"Oh!" gasped Hazel. "But isn't it dangerous?"

"A little, of course. But it would be worse to let sleeping dogs lie. It may be a harmless tramp—or a poor laborer—a woodsman."

At the same time she knew perfectly well that any character of either type she mentioned would not go crawling around under stalled motor cars in the Berkshire hills.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MIDNIGHT TOW

A MORE frightened set of girls than were our young friends that night could scarcely be imagined. Although Cora did tramp around after Ed and his lamp, with her pistol in her hand, she was trembling, and had good reason to be alarmed. As for Bess and Belle, they were, as Hazel said, "tied up in a knot" on the bottom of Cora's car, too terrified to cry. Hazel herself felt no inclination to explore on her own account, but was actually walking on Jack's heels, as he poked the motor lamp in and out of possible hiding places, seeking the mysterious shadow that had been seen to move and had been heard to rustle in the grass.

But he was not found—a big slouch hat being the only tangible clew unearthed to a real personality. And this Walter dug out of a hole near a rear wheel of the *Whirlwind.*

"Don't tell the girls," he whispered to Jack, "but here's his top-piece."

"Put it away—in the *Comet.* We might need it," said Jack, in the same low voice.

"Well, girls, of course you are frightened," began Ed. "What do you say to all crowding into the *Whirlwind* and talking it out the rest of the night? We could make noise enough to scare away a dozen tramps."

This idea was greeted with delight, even Bess and Belle venturing to poke their heads out of the tonneau door to beg the boys "all to come in."

No more thought of Miss Robbins! It was now a matter of doing the best they could to restore something of the girls' lost nerves. And Ed, Jack and Walter undertook the task with considerable more seriousness than it had occurred to the much-alarmed girls it might be necessary to give the matter.

All the girls asked for was protection—all the boys thought of giving was confidence.

"My poor, dear *Whirlwind,*" sighed Cora, as Ed assisted her into the tonneau. "To think that you have made all this trouble!"

"No such thing," interrupted Walter gallantly. "It is up to us. We deserted you just to see who would make the hill in best time, and this serves us right."

Bess, Belle and Hazel found plenty of room

on the broad-cushioned seat, while Jack decided that he wouldn't mind in the least sitting down on the floor beside Cora, who had the folding chair.

Ed and Walter took their places outside "on the box," and when the three other cars were lined up close the dark, dreary night under the trees, with the prospect of a man crawling around with malice aforethought, brightened up some. Even the moon peeked through the trees to make things look more pleasant, and to Belle company had never been so delightful before. She actually laughed at everything Jack said, and agreed that it would be fun to live in a motor houseboat.

Cora alone was silent. She pleaded fatigue, but Jack knew that his sister did not give in to fatigue so easily; he also knew that she had seen the gypsy's hat!

She lay with her head pillowed on her brother's shoulder and closed her eyes, feigning sleep.

It was the same little sister Jack often told stories to, and the same black head that now was so glad to rest where many other evenings it had rested, when the mother was out and the sister did not like to "go to bed all alone, please, Jackie dear!"

"It's a great thing to have a brother," blurted

out Bess, in her ridiculous way, until Jack declared that he had another shoulder, and she might appropriate it if she wished to be a "sister" to him.

"I guess I am too nervous to motor at night," admitted Belle. "I think, after this trip, I will plan mine by daylight."

"But this was so planned," said Cora. "Whoever thought we would be stalled, that we would lose Miss Robbins, and that we would have to camp out all night in the *Whirlwind?*"

"Of course, whoever thought it?" agreed Jack, stroking the head on his shoulder.

"Do you suppose Walter and Ed are dead?" asked Cora.

"Not that, but sleeping," returned Jack. "If they die they will never forget it as long as they live. There is a sacred duty in standing picket duty."

"Oh, a light!" suddenly screamed Bess. "It's coming this way!"

"Steady, there," shouted Ed, in his clear, deep voice. "Pass to the left!" and he tooted the horn of the *Whirlwind.*

"A machine!" announced Jack, as he jumped up and peered through the wind shield.

"Oh! isn't that lovely?" gasped Belle, willing

at once to abandon her company for the prospect of getting out of the woods.

By this time a big motor car had slowed up at the side of the other cars. The chauffeur alighted and, with all the chivalry of the road, asked what the trouble was. Leaving out the scare and the hat part, the boys soon told of their difficulty and the young ladies' plight, whereat an old gentleman, the only occupant of the car, insisted that the young ladies get in with him, and that his man, Benson, be allowed to tow the stalled car out of the hills. They decided to do this, agreeing that they had had enough of "camping out."

"What name? What name did you say, sir?" he asked Jack, at the same time kicking his many robes up into a corner to make all possible room in his magnificent car.

"Kimball," replied Jack, "of Chelton, and the other names are——"

"That's enough, plenty," the gentleman declared heartily. "I knew Joseph Kimball, of Chelton, and I guess he was your father."

"Yes," replied Jack, astonished at thus meeting a family friend.

"Well, when he went to Chelton I located in New Hampshire; that's where I belong."

"Do you? That's where we are going—to the White Mountains, after a little stay in the Berkshires," finished Jack, as he handed Cora into the handsome car, and then likewise assisted Hazel and Belle.

"Well, I guess we can fix you up then," said the old gentleman, in that hearty manner that can never be mistaken for mere politeness. "I have a girl of my own. We are in the Berkshires now."

"I will be delighted to know——" then Cora stopped. She had not yet heard the gentleman's name.

"Betty Rand—that's my girl. She's Elizabeth, of course, but Betty's good enough for me. Get right in here, girlie," to Belle. "Got room enough?"

"Oh, yes, plenty, thank you," and Belle slipped down into the cushions with an audible sigh.

"Well, you can depend upon Benson. See that! He's got the car hitched already! Never saw a fellow like Benson," and Mr. Rand spread the robe over the knees of Belle and Cora, with whom he sat, while Hazel had taken the small chair. "Keep warm," he told her. "Night air out here is trickish. I always take plenty of robes along."

Hazel assured him that she had every comfort,

and then they heard Ed toot the horn of the *Fly-away,* as he and Bess started off in the lead. Walter was in his *Comet,* and when Jack was sure that everything was in readiness for the *Whirl-wind* to be towed after the big six-cylinder machine, he jumped into his *Get-There,* and presently the whole party was off again, going toward Lenox.

It was a wonderful relief—every one felt it—to be moving away from dread and darkness.

"I always come up by night from New York," said Mr. Rand. "The roads are clear, and it saves time. Besides, to-morrow is Betty's birthday, and I have to be home."

"Yes," said Cora politely. "We had no idea of traveling alone like this, but our chaperon ——"

"Well, you've got one now," interrupted the man nicely, noticing Cora's embarrassment. "I often do it for Betty—she's only got me."

There was a catch in his voice this time, and while the three girls instantly felt that "the bars were down again," and that they really did have a chaperon in the person of this delightful gentleman, still it would have seemed rude to break the effect of his last remark.

"We are getting her up, all right," he said, re-

ferring to towing the *Whirlwind.* "Never saw the like of Benson."

"Isn't it splendid?" exclaimed Cora, looking back into the darkness and thus discerning the lamps of her car following. "It is a dreadful thing to be stalled."

"Can't be beat," agreed Mr. Rand. "We get it once in a while, though Benson is a wonder—knows when to stop without getting a blow-out."

"That's what we had," said Cora, "a blow-out."

"Girls speeding!" and he slapped his knees in good nature. "Now, Betty thinks she can't go unless the engine stutters, as she calls it. I declare, girls are worse than men these days! Speeding!"

Cora tried to tell something of the circumstances responsible for her speed, but he would take no excuse—it was ordinary speed, just like Betty's, he declared.

"And you lost your chaperon?" He said this with a delightful chuckle, evidently relishing the circumstances that threw the interesting young party into his company.

"Yes," spoke Belle, "there was a fire at the hotel, and she was a doctor. Of course, we didn't count when there were men to be bandaged up."

"A fire!" repeated Mr. Rand. "At a hotel! The Restover, I'm sure. Why, that is my hotel. I mean I am one of the owners, and on my way up I met the woman doctor. So she was your chaperon! Well, I declare! Now, that's what I call a coincidence. That young woman—let me see. She was nursing the head waiter. Ha, ha! a good fellow to nurse. Always keep in with the head waiter."

"Oh, he was that good-looking fellow, Cora," said Hazel. "Don't you remember how he soared around?"

"A bird, eh?" and Mr. Rand laughed again. "Well, say," and his voice went down into the intimate key, "I wouldn't be surprised if your chaperon gave up her business. I heard some remarks about how very devoted she was to that head waiter."

"Oh, Miss Robbins would never marry a waiter!" declared Belle. "Why, she's a practicing physician!"

"But sometimes the practice is hard and uncertain," Mr. Rand reminded them. "I shouldn't be surprised when I go back there to straighten up accounts to find the doctor and the waiter 'doing nicely.' "

"But how is the man we—that is—who went

to the hospital?" asked Cora eagerly. "He was very badly hurt."

"Oh, Jim, wasn't it? Why, he is getting along! By crackie!" and he slapped his knee again, "I have it! It was you who took Jim to the hospital! Now, I see! A motor girl with black hair and a maroon machine! Now, I have, more than ever, reason to be your friend, Miss Kimball. Jim has been with me for years, and had he died as the result of an accident at Restover—well, I shouldn't have gotten over it easily."

"But some one had to take him," said Cora modestly.

"Oh, I know all about that. That's like your excuse for speeding, and it's like Betty again. Wait until she hears that you saved Jim."

"One would never know we were towing a car," intervened Hazel. "We sail along so beautifully."

"But you babies have been awake all night," said Mr. Rand suddenly. "Now, couldn't you just tuck in somehow and sleep a wink or two? You won't get a chance when you see Betty. She's a regular phonograph—friendship's her key."

"I am sleepy," confessed Cora.

"I'm tired," admitted Belle.

"And I'm dead," declared Hazel.

"Then it's settled. You are each to go to sleep instantly, and if those fellows blow that horn again, I won't let them in to Betty's party," and Mr. Rand, in his wonderful, fatherly way, seemed to tuck each girl into a perfectly comfortable bed. "Now sleep! No more——"

"Gypsies!" groaned Cora, but although he said not a word in reply, he knew perfectly well just what she meant.

CHAPTER XV

THE GYPSY'S WARNING

It was at Betty's party. And as Mr. Rand had told our friends, Betty was a wonderful girl—for being happy and making others happy.

Now, here it was less than a year from the time of her dear mother's death, and on her own birthday, of course, she would not have a party, but when Daddy came in with his arms full of company and bundles, as Betty put it, of course she turned right in and had an impromptu party—just to make Daddy happy.

It was an easy matter to gather in a few of the nearby cottagers, of whom there were many very pleasant samples, and so, when the evening following the midnight tow arrived, the party from Chelton found themselves rested and ready for the festivities. As usual, Walter was devoted to Betty. Jack liked her, Ed admired her, but Walter claimed her—that was his way. She was a pretty girl of rather an unusual type, accounted

for, her father declared, by the fact that her mother was an Irish beauty, and gave to Betty that wonderful golden-red hair, the hazel eyes and the indescribable complexion that is said to come from generations of buttermilk.

And withal she was such a little flirt! How she did cling to Walter, make eyes at Ed and defy Jack, giving to each the peculiar attention that his special case most needed.

Belle and Bess found it necessary to take up with some very pleasant chaps from a nearby hotel, while Cora and Hazel made themselves agreeable with two friends of Mr. Rand's—boys from New York, who had many mutual acquaintances with Chelton folks and, therefore, could talk of other things than gears and gasoline.

Mr. Rand was on the side porch, and when the drawing-room conversation waited for the next remark, his voice might be heard in a very animated discussion. Cora sat near a French window, and she heard:

"But the hat! How did his particular hat get there?"

The answer of his friend was not audible.

"I tell you," went on the gentleman, "this thing has got to be watched. I don't like it!"

"Oh, Cora!" chirped Belle. "Do sing the

'Gypsy's Warning.' We haven't heard it since the night——"

"Walter fished up a chaperon," added Jack, with a laugh.

"The 'Gypsy's Warning'!" repeated Betty.

"It's a very old song," explained Cora, "but we had to revive something, so we revived——"

"The gyp," finished Ed, getting up and fetching Cora's guitar from the tete in the corner. "Do sing it, Cora. This is such a gypsy land out here."

"Are there?" asked Bess, in sudden alarm.

"There *are*," said Ed mockingly. "There are gypsy land out here!"

"Oh, you know perfectly well what I meant," and Bess pursed her lips prettily.

"Course I do; if I didn't—land help me—I would need a map and a horoscope in my pocket every single minute."

"Come on, Cora, sing," pleaded Hazel. "Let them hear about our Warning."

"I'm afraid it's too late," objected Cora with a sly look at Betty and Walter. "We should have sent the warning on ahead of us."

She stood up to take the instrument from Ed's hands. She was near the French window again.

"I tell you," she heard Mr. Rand say, "these gypsy fellows will stoop to anything. And as for

revenge—they say once a gypsy always a gypsy. Which means they will stick by each other——"

"Come on, Cora. We want the song. I remember my mother used to sing the 'Gypsy's Warning,' and she brought it right down to date —we never went near a camp," said Walter.

The threat of the old gypsy woman rang in Cora's ears. She could see her raise that brown finger and hear her say: "If you harm Salvo, harm shall be upon your head." Cora had testified against Salvo. A hat known to belong to a member of the tribe was later found at midnight under Cora's car, miles from the town where the robbery had been committed. Were they following her?

"Oh, really, I can't sing to-night," she protested rather lamely. "I have a cold."

The voices on the porch had ceased. Betty was claiming her father for some game. The evening had not been a great success.

"And to-morrow," faltered Walter, "we pass on. I wish we had decided to stay in the Berkshires, but of course the girls must make the White Mountains," and he fell back in his chair as if overwhelmed. "I fancy Bess is ambitious to climb Mount Washington."

"I possibly could—as well as the others," and

Bess flushed at the mention of anything in the flesh-reducing line. "I have always been a pretty fair climber."

"Yes, that's right," called Jack. "I remember one time Bess climbed in the window at school. A lemon pie had been locked up inadvertently."

"But you ought to see more of Lenox," spoke Betty. "I do wish you would stay—for a few days at least."

"So do I," said Walter with flagrant honesty.

"But the season wanes," remarked Cora, "and we must keep to our itinerary. Now that my machine has been overhauled I anticipate a royal run. Betty, can't you come with us? Mr. Rand says you have been here all summer——"

"And too much is enough," declared the ensnared Walter. "Betty, if you would come we might mount Mount Washington."

"What do you say, papa?"

"Why, go, of course; it would be the very thing for you. And then, don't you see, I shouldn't have to give up my job as chaperon," and he clapped his hands on his knees and chuckled with a relish that all enjoyed.

Mr. Rand decided that he would go and take his gorgeous car, and the pretty, bright little Irish

Betty! Why, it would be like starting all over again!

Hazel was fingering Cora's guitar. The chords of the "Gypsy's Warning" just floated through the room. Walter hummed, Jack almost whistled, Ed looked the part, but Cora!

Cora, brave, beautiful and capable—Cora jumped up and seemed to find some flowers in the vases absolutely absorbing. Cora did not take any part in rendering even the subdued "Gypsy's Warning."

CHAPTER XVI

THE DISAPPEARANCE

"BUT it is lonely, and I think we had best keep close together."

"But I want to——"

"Show Betty how beautiful it is to be lonely. Wallie Pennington, you are breaking your contract. No one was to get——"

"Personal. Oh, all right—take Betty," and Walter emitted a most unmusical brawl. "Of course, you and Ed are keeping the contract. You are doing as you please. Behold Ed now, carrying Cora over a pebble——"

"That's because Ed loves *me,*" declared Jack, "and he is saving Cora's boots."

"All the same, I simply won't carry Bess. She might melt in my arms."

The young men were exploring the woods in the White Mountains. The girls were racing about in absolute delight over the ferns, while Mr. Rand,

who had actually taken the "jaunt" from the hotel afoot, sat on a huge stone comparing notes with his muscles, and with the inactive years of discretion and indiscretion.

"They're like a lot of young animals," he was saying to any one near enough to hear, "and I—I am like something that really ought to know better."

"Just suppose," said Jack to Ed, "that a young deer should spring out just there where Belle and Hazel are sitting. What do you think would be the act?"

"Hazel would try to catch the deer, and Belle would go up a tree. Give me something harder."

"Well, then, suppose a tramp should come along the path and ask Betty for the thing that hangs around her neck. What would happen then?"

"Walter would get mixed up with his tramp-ship. That, too, is easy."

"Cora says we have got to get back to earth in time for the Chelton fair. Now, I never thought that Cora cared about that sort of thing," Walter remarked.

"But it's the home town, and Cora knows her name is on some committee," replied Ed. "I guess we will get enough of these wilds in a

week. At any rate, all Cora does care for is the car—she would rather motor than eat."

Betty had taken some wild berries to her father. "I say, sis," he pleaded, "can't we get back? I am stiffening, and you may all have to get together and carry me."

"Are you so tired? Poor dad! I didn't think the walk was too much. But you do feel it!" and she sat down on a soft clump of grass at his feet. "Well, as soon as the girls get their ferns and things they want to take home for specimens, we will start back. If you really are tired, we could get a carriage at the foot of the hill."

"And have you youngsters laugh at me! Never! I would die walking first," and Mr. Rand stretched himself to show how near death he really was. "Now, I tell you, we will all take the bus back. That would be more like it."

This suggestion was rapidly spread among the woodland party, and when the girls did finally consent to desert the growing things and leave a "speck of something for the rabbits to eat," as Jack put it, the start for the hotel was made.

At the foot of the hill, or the opening of the mountain path, an old woman, a gypsy, stood with the inevitable basket on her arm.

"Tell your fortune, lady? Tell you the truth,"

"TELL YOUR FORTUNE, LADY?" SHE CALLED.

she called, and actually put her hand out to stop Cora as she was passing. "Tell it for a quarter."

"Take a basketful," suggested Ed, sotto voce. "I would like to know what's going to become of Wallie when we get back to Chelton."

As usual, Walter was helping Betty, who, with her light laugh and equally light step, was making her way over the last stones of the wood way.

"Tell your fortune——"

"Oh, no," called back Mr. Rand, who had stopped to see what was delaying the party. "We don't need to be told. Here woman," and he threw back a coin, "take this and buy a—new shawl."

All this time the woman was standing directly in Cora's way. The path was very narrow, and on either side was close brushwood. Cora stepped in the bushes in order to get out to the road, and as she did she stumbled and fell.

In an instant Ed had caught her up, but not before the old woman had peered deep into Cora's face, had actually moved her scarf as if looking for some mark of recognition.

"I'll help her up," the woman exclaimed, when she saw that Ed was angry enough to thrust her to the edge of the pathway. "I see a fine fortune in her eyes. They are black, her hair is black,

and she has the appearance of the girl who runs an automobile. Oh, yes, I remember!" and she now turned away satisfied. "These girls ride much. But she—she is their leader!"

"Oh, come," whispered Belle. "I am so frightened. That is one of the gypsies from the beach camp."

Cora had regained her feet, and with a bruised hand was now passing along with the others.

"We might have had a couple of quarts of fortune out of that basket just as well as not," insisted Jack. "I never saw anything so handy."

"Oh, those gypsies are a pest," declared Mr. Rand. "But I am just superstitious enough not to want to offend any of them. I claim to be a first-class chaperon—first-class!"

"Are you hurt, Cora?" asked Bess, seeing that Cora was pressing her hand to her lips.

"Only scratched from the brush," and she winced. "Those berry bushes seem to have a grudge against me."

"But the old Gypsy?" asked Bess, as the two girls stood close together.

"Oh, I didn't mind her rant," replied Cora. "They always have something wonderful to tell one."

"I wish they would not cross our path so

often," went on the other girl. "Seems to me they have been the one drawback of our entire trip."

"Let us hope that they will now be satisfied," said Cora with that indefinite manner which so often conveys a stronger meaning than might have been intended.

Both girls sighed. Then they joined the others, while the old gypsy woman looked after them sharply.

Ed was hailing the driver of the bus—"Silent Bill," they called him, because he was never known to keep still, not even at his grandmother's funeral. Silent Bill lost no time in getting his horses headed right, also in starting out to describe the wonders and beauties of the White Mountains.

It was fun to take the bus ride, and no one was more pleased at the prospect than was Mr. Rand.

"Nothing like sitting down square," he declared. "Why young folks always want to walk themselves into the grave is more than I pretend to understand."

"My, but that old gypsy woman did frighten me," said Belle to Hazel. "I never saw such a look as she gave Cora! I honestly thought she was going to drop. Maybe she——"

"Blew powder into her eyes. The same thought came to me," replied Hazel. "Well, I hope we won't see any more gypsies until we get within police precincts. We have had enough of them here."

Then Silent Bill called out something about how the air in those peaks would make a dead man well. "Look at them peaks!" he insisted. "That's what fetches folks up here every summer."

"They fetched me down," remarked Mr. Rand, "but then I never did care for peaks."

"Now, Mr. Rand," corrected Cora, "didn't you take a peek into my auto the night it broke down? Seems to me there are peeks and peaks ——"

Amid laughter they rode along, enjoying the splendid scenery and bracing air, but the gypsy's face was haunting Cora.

That evening there was to be a hop at the hotel. As many of the patrons were soon leaving for home, it was expected that the affair would be entered into with all the energy that could be summoned from the last of the season. There would not be another big affair until the next summer, so all must "make hay" while the lights held out.

Our friends had some trouble in finding just the correct wearing things in the small auto trunks, but pretty girls can so safely depend upon youth and good manners that simple frocks were pressed literally and physically for the occasion, whereas many of the all-season guests at the Tip-Top were not so self-reliant. Motor-made complexions, and the eyes that go with that peculiar form of beauty, formed a combination beyond dispute.

Cora wore her pale yellow poplin, Betty was in all white, of course; Bess looked like an apple blossom in something pinkish, and Belle was the evening star in her dainty blue. Hazel "had on" a light green affair. We say "had on," for that's the way Hazel had of wearing things—she hated the bother of fixing up.

The young men were not expected to have evening "togs" in their runabout traps, but they did have some really good-looking, fresh, summer flannels that made them appear just as well dressed and much better looking than some of the "swells" in their regular dress suits.

"What a wonderful time!" exclaimed Betty. "I never thought we could have such a jolly good time at a regular hotel affair."

"Why?" asked Hazel, wondering.

"Because there are so many kinds of people that——"

"We are all chorus, and no spot light?" interrupted Walter mischievously. "But we might put you up on the window sill."

"Indeed!" and the little lady flounced off. "Now you may fill in that girl's card over there —the red-headed one. She has been looking at you most all evening, and I have promised at least four dances."

Walter looked as if he would fall at Betty's feet if there had been sufficient room.

"Betty! Betty!" he begged. "If you do not give me the 'Yale' I shall leave the ballroom instanter."

"Oh, if you really want it," agreed Betty, and off they went.

Bess was soon "puffed out" with the vigorous dance. She was with Jack.

"Let's sit it out," she suggested. "I seem to be all out of breath."

"Certainly," agreed Jack. "But couldn't I get some for you, or send you some?"

"Some what?"

"Breath, wasn't that what you wanted? Here is a splendid place for a breathing spell."

Bess laughed and sat down with her partner.

"There are all sorts of ways to dance," she remarked as the "red-headed" girl, who had eyes for Walter, stepped on her toes in passing.

"Those girls from the Breakwater seem to have spite against us," remarked Jack. "That is the second time they have stepped on our toes."

"And she is no featherweight," answered Bess, frowning.

"Strange thing that good clothes cannot cover bad manners," went on Jack, who was plainly annoyed. "Let us take the other bench. She can't possibly reach us in the alcove."

Cora was just gliding by.

"Lazy," she called lightly. "You are missing the best dance."

"I'm tired," replied Bess. "Besides we want to watch you."

At this Ed, who was Cora's partner, gave a wonderful swirl to show just how beautifully he and Cora could do the "Yale Rush."

"Cora is *such* a good dancer," Bess whispered to Jack, "but then Cora is good at most everything." There was no sarcasm in her tone.

"Oh yes, for a little sister she is all right," agreed the young man. "She might be worse."

"Oh," exclaimed Bess suddenly. "I saw such a face at that window!"

"Plenty of faces around here to-night," observed Jack lightly.

"But that—oh! let us go away from here. I am nervous!"

"Certainly," and Jack took her arm. "Now if that were Belle," he proceeded calmly, and then paused.

Bess was actually trembling when they crossed to the stairway, but she soon recovered her composure.

She said nothing more about the face she had seen peering through the window and tried to forget it, as the dance went on.

After the "Paul Jones," a feature of the Tip-Top affairs, had been danced, every one wanted to cool off or down, according to the temperature desired. Cora was with Ed. They had drifted out on a side porch. Without any preamble one of the waiters touched Ed on the arm and told him there was a message for him waiting in the office.

"How do you know it's for me?" asked Ed, astonished.

"You are with the motor girls, aren't you?" replied the man, as if that were an explanation.

"I'll take you back to the others," said Ed to Cora. "I may as well see what it is."

"Oh, run along. It may be something urgent," suggested Cora. "I can slip back into the dance room when I want to, or I can wait here. You won't be long."

Ed followed the waiter indoors, then went into the office as he directed. He was not absent more than ten minutes, but when he returned to the porch Cora was gone!

CHAPTER XVII

MISSING

"I LEFT her here ten minutes ago!" gasped Ed, trembling with excitement, as he related the news.

"She must have gone inside," replied Jack, equally alarmed. "We must look before we tell the others."

"No, give the alarm first, and look afterward," insisted Ed. "The thing that counts is to find her; people's nerves may rest afterwards. I think we had best call the hotel manager. That message sent me was a fake. It was an envelope addressed to me, and contained nothing but a blank paper. It was a game to get me away from Cora!"

"Perhaps you are right. But I do hate to alarm every one. I know that Cora would feel that way herself. What's this?" and Jack stooped to the porch floor. "Her fan!"

Ed almost snatched the trinket from Jack's

hand. "The chain is broken," he said, "and she had it on when I left her. I remember how she dropped the fan to her side and it hung there."

Here was a new proof of something very wrong—the chain was broken in two places.

"Don't let us waste a moment," begged Ed, starting for the hotel office. "I will speak with the manager first."

Jack felt as if something was gripping at his heart. Cora gone! Could it be possible that anything had really happened to her? Could she have been kidnapped? No, she must be somewhere with some of the girls.

He followed Ed mechanically into the office. The manager was at the desk looking over the register.

"A young lady has just disappeared from the west-end porch," began Ed, rather awkwardly, "and I fear that something strange has happened to her. I was called in here by this fake message" —he produced a slip of blank paper—"and while I was in here she disappeared."

"No one else gone?" asked the manager with a questioning smile.

"Why, no," replied Ed indignantly. "I was with Miss Kimball almost up to the moment she disappeared."

Jack stepped forward. "I know that my sister would not give us one moment's anxiety were it in her power to avoid it," he said. "She is the most thoughtful girl in the world."

The manager was looking at the envelope Ed held. "Who did you say told you about this?" he asked of Ed.

"A waiter."

"Just come along with me, and we will see the waiters and kitchen men before we disturb the guests," said the manager.

They passed through the halls, where knots of the guests were strolling about passing the time between the dances—all apparently happy and contented. But Jack and Ed! What would be the outcome of their anxiety?

"This way," said the hotel proprietor. "Let me see, you are——" he paused suggestively.

"My name is Foster, and this is Mr. Kimball," said Ed.

In the kitchen they found everything in confusion. The chef had lined up every man in the department, and he was questioning them.

"What's this?" asked Mr. Blake, the proprietor.

"Some one has been in here, or some one here has made away with a lot of the silver and with

money from the men's pockets," replied the chef indignantly. "We have got to find out who is the culprit. I won't stand for that sort of thing."

"Certainly not," Mr. Blake assured him, "but perhaps we can help you. Mr. Foster, will you kindly pick out the man who told you about that message?"

The men stood up. Ed scrutinized each carefully.

"None of these," he said finally.

"Are you sure every one is here, Max?" asked Mr. Blake.

"Every one, sir; even the last man I hired, who has never had an apron on yet."

"Could it be any one from the outside?" faltered Jack.

"No one could get in here and manage to make his way through——"

"Excuse me, sir," said a very blond young waiter, "but I think a stranger has been in here. My locker was broken open and my apron—one of the best—is gone."

"Is that so?" spoke Mr. Blake sharply. "Then we have no time to spare. The young lady——"

"Oh, don't say it," cried Jack. "Cora kidnapped!"

"Jack, old boy, be brave," whispered Ed, pat-

ting him on the shoulder. "Wherever Cora is, the gods are with her!"

"We must first institute a thorough search," declared Mr. Blake. "You men form an outside posse. Be quick. Search every inch of the grounds. Max, no more kitchen duty to-night. Here, Ben, you ring the hall bell. That will bring the porters together. Then, Dave"—to a handsome young Englishman—"I put you in charge. That young lady must be found to-night."

Ed and Jack exchanged glances. Would she really be found? Oh, how terrible it all seemed!

"I must speak with Mr. Rand," said Jack. "Ed, you tell the girls."

All that had been gayety and gladness was instantly turned into consternation and confusion. A young lady lured away from the Tip-Top! And the hotel crowded with guests!

Belle was obliged to call for a doctor. Nor was it any case of imagined nerves. The excitement of the big ball had been enough, the disappearance of Cora was more than her weak heart could stand. Bess tried to be brave, but to lose Cora! Then she recalled the face at the window.

Hazel and Betty waited for nothing, but took up a lantern and started out to search. If she

had fallen down some place! Oh, if they could only make her hear them!

"Here, porter," called Mr. Rand, when he had heard all the details that could be given, "get me a donkey—a good, lively donkey. I can manage one of the little beasts better than I can a horse. I used to ride one in Egypt. I'll go over the hills if it is midnight."

"Oh, don't, Mr. Rand," begged Jack. "You are not strong enough to go over the mountains that way."

"I am not, eh! Well, young man, I'll show you!" and he was already waiting for the donkey to be brought up from the hotel stables. "Nothing like a good donkey for a thing that has to be done."

But it was such a wild wilderness—the sort chosen just on that account for hotel purposes. And after the brilliancy of the ballroom it did seem so very dark out of doors.

"This way, Hazel," said Betty courageously. "I know the loneliest spot. Maybe she has been stolen, and might be hidden away in that hollow."

"But if we go there alone——"

"I'm not afraid," and Betty clutched her light stick. "If I found her, they would hear me scream all the way to—Portland!"

Men were searching all over the grounds. Every possible sort of outdoor lantern had been pressed into service, and the glare of searchlights flickered from place to place like big fireflies.

It was terrible—everything dreadful was being imagined. Only Ed, Walter and Jack tried to see a possibility of some mistake—of some reasonable explanation.

It was exciting at first, that strange, dark hunt, but it soon became dreary, dull and desolate.

Hazel and Betty gave up to have a good cry. Jack and Ed insisted upon following Mr. Rand on horses, making their way over the mountain roads and continually calling Cora.

Walter followed the advice of the hotel proprietor, and went to notify the drivers of a stage line, which took passengers on at the Point.

But how suddenly all had been thrown into a panic of fear at the loss of Cora! Not a girl to play pranks, in spite of some whispers about the hotel, those most concerned knew that Cora Kimball was at least being held a prisoner against her will somewhere; by whom, or with whom, no one could conjecture.

What really had become of daring, dashing Cora Kimball?

CHAPTER XVIII

KIDNAPPED

"Oh! Where am I?"

"Hush! You are safe! But keep very quiet."

Then Cora forgot—something smelled so strong, and she felt so sleepy.

"We are almost there!"

"But see the lights!"

"They will never turn into the gully!"

"If they do——"

"I'll——"

"Hush!"

"She is a strong girl!"

"So much the better. Give her a drink."

"I don't like it."

"You don't have to."

"Do you know what they do now with kidnappers?"

"She's no kid."

"But it's just the same."

"Hold your tongue. You have given me more bother than she has."

"Salvo deserved what he got."

"You deserve something, too," and the older woman, speaking to a young girl, gave the latter a blow with a whip. The girl winced, and showed her white teeth. She would some day break away from Mother Hull.

They were riding in a gypsy wagon through the mountains, and it was one hour after Cora Kimball had been taken away from the porch of the Tip-Top. The drivers of the wagon were the most desperate members of the North Woods gypsy clan, and they had not the slightest fear that the searchers, who were actually almost flashing their lights in to the very wagon that bore Cora away, could ever discover her whereabouts.

It was close and ill-smelling in that van. Cora was not altogether unconscious, and she turned uneasily on the bundle of straw deep in the bottom of the big wagon.

"She is waking," said the girl presently.

"She can now, if she's a mind to. We are in Dusky Hollow."

"I won't be around when she does awake. I don't like it."

"If you say any more, I'll give you a dose. Maybe you—want—to go—to sleep."

"When I want to I shall," and the black eyes flashed in the darkness. "We did not promise to——"

"Shut up!" and again that whip rang like the whisper of some frightened tree.

"Oh, stop!" yelled the girl, or I shall——"

"Oh, no, you—won't. You just hold—your tongue."

The horses shied, and the wagon skidded. Were they held up?

"Right there, Sam," ordered the driver. "Easy—steady, Ned. Pull over here."

The wagons moved forward again, and the women felt that the possible danger of discovery had passed.

"Keep quiet in there," called a rough voice from the seat. "These woods are thick with trailers."

For some time no one within the van spoke. Then Cora turned, and the woman wearing the thick hood clapped something over Cora's nose.

"Oh, don't! She has had enough. Let her at least live," begged the younger woman, actually fanning Cora's white face with her own soiled handkerchief.

The night seemed blacker and darker at each turn. Shouts from the searchers occasionally reached the ears of those within the wagon, and once Mr. Rand on his donkey might have seen them but for the trickery of the driver, who pulled his horses into some shadowy bushes and waited for the searchers to pass.

The young gypsy woman peered down into Cora's face.

"She's pretty," she said, with some sympathy.

"Well, by the time she's out perhaps she won't be so pretty," sneered the older woman. "I swore revenge for Salvo, and I'll have it."

"Oh, you and Salvo! Seems to me a man ought to be able——"

"You cat! Do you want to go back to the cave?"

The girl was silent again.

"Where—am I? Jack! Jack!" Cora moaned.

"Here! Don't you dare give her another drop of that stuff, or I'll—squeal!"

The old woman stopped, and in the darkness of the wagon Mother Hull felt, rather than saw, that the younger one would do as she threatened. She might shout! Then those searching the woods would hear.

"We will soon be there. Then she may call

for Jack until her throat is sore!" muttered the hag.

Cora tossed on her bed of straw. The chloroform kept her quiet, but she knew and felt that she was being borne away somewhere into that dark and lonely night. She could remember now how Ed had gone inside the hotel, and he had not come back! He would be back presently, and yes, she would try to sleep until he returned!

She moaned and tried to call, but her voice was like that strange struggle of sound that comes in nightmare. It means nothing except to the sleeper.

"She's choking," said the gypsy girl.

"Let her," replied Mother Hull. "We can dump her easily here."

"You—hag!" almost screamed the girl. "I will shout if you don't give her air."

"Here! here!" called a voice from the seat. "If you two can't keep quiet, you know what we can do!"

"She's choking!" insisted the girl.

"Let her!" mocked the man.

"I—won't. Help! Help!" yelled the girl, and as she did the light of a powerful automobile lamp was directed into the gypsy wagon!

"There they are!" could be heard plainly.

"Where?" asked the anxious ones.

"In the gulch! Head them off! I saw a wagon!"

Quicker than any one save a mountaineer knew how to swing around, that wagon swerved, turned and was again lost in the darkness.

"Thought they had us!" called the man from the seat. "Lena, you will pay for this!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE DEN OF THE GYPSY QUEEN

CORA opened her eyes. Standing over her was a woman—or was it a dream? A woman with flowing hair, beautiful, dark eyes, a band of gold like a crown about her head, and shimmering, dazzling stuff on her gown. Was Cora really awake?

"Well," said the figure, "you are not bad-looking."

"Oh, I am so—sick," moaned Cora.

"I'll ring for something. Would you take wine?"

"No, thank you; water," murmured Cora.

The moments were becoming more real to Cora, but with consciousness came that awful sickness and that dizziness. She looked at the woman in the flowing red robes. Who could she be? Surely she was beautiful, and her face was kind and her manner sweet.

The woman pulled a small cord, and presently a girl appeared to answer.

"What, madam?" asked the girl.

"Some limewater and some milk. And for me, some new cigarettes. Those Sam brought I could not use. You will find my key in my dressing table."

She turned to Cora as the girl left. "You may have anything you want," she said, "and you need not worry. No harm will come to you. I rather think we shall be great friends."

She sat down on some soft cushions on the floor.

Then Cora noticed that her own resting place was also on the floor—a sort of flat couch—soft, but smelling so strongly of some strange odor. Was it smoke or perfume?

"Do you mind if I smoke?" asked the woman. "I am Helka, the gypsy queen. That is, they call me that, although I am really Lillian, and I never had any fancy for this queening." She smiled bitterly. The girl entered again with a tray and a small silver case. "The water is for my friend," said the queen, and the girl walked over to Cora. "Do you think you are strong enough to take milk? Perhaps you would like lime in it."

"Thank you very much," murmured Cora, "but I am very sick, and I have never been ill before."

"It is the chloroform. It is sickish stuff, and Sam said you had to have a big dose."

"Chloroform!"

"Yes, don't you know? Don't you remember anything?"

"Yes, I was on the hotel porch with Ed."

"With Ed? I wish they had kidnapped Ed, although you are very nice, and when I heard them putting you in the dark room, where we put the bad gypsy girls, I insisted upon them bringing you right here. I had some trouble, Sam is a rough one, but I conquered. And let me tell you something." She stooped very low and whispered, "Trust me! Don't ask any questions when the girls are around. You may have everything but freedom!"

"Am I a prisoner?"

"Don't you remember the gypsy's warning? Didn't Mother Hull warn you not to go against Salvo?"

"The robber?"

"Hush! They are listening at that door, and I want you to stay with me. Are you very tired?" She was lighting a cigarette. "I would play something for you. Do you like music?"

"Sometimes," said Cora, "but I am afraid I am going to cry——"

"That's the reason I want to make some noise. They won't come in here, and they won't know you are crying. We must make them think you like it here."

Cora turned and buried her face in the cushions. She realized that she had been abducted, and was being held a prisoner in this strange place. But she must—she felt she must—do as the woman told her. Just a few tears from sheer nervousness, then she would be brave.

"Don't you ever smoke?" asked the queen. "I should die or run the risk of the dogs except for my cigarettes."

"The risk——"

"Hush! Yes, they have dreadful dogs. I, too, am," she whispered, "a prisoner. I will tell you about it later."

She picked up an instrument and fingered it. It seemed like the harp, but it was not much larger than a guitar. The chords were very sweet, very deep and melodious. She was a skilled musician; even in her distress Cora could not fail to notice that.

"I haven't any new music," said the queen. "They promised to fetch me some, but this trou-

ble has kept the whole band busy. Now, how do you like this?" She swept her white fingers over the strings like some fairy playing with a wind-harp. "That is my favorite composition."

"Do you compose?"

"Oh, yes, it gives me something to do, and I never could endure painting or sewing, so I work out pretty tunes and put them on paper. Sometimes they send them to the printers for me."

"Do you never leave here? Am I in America?" asked Cora.

"Bless you, yes, you are in America; but no, to the other question. I have never left this house or the grounds since I came to America."

"From——"

"England. You see, I am not a noble gypsy, for I live in a house and have sat on chairs, although they don't like it. This house is an old mansion in the White Mountains."

"It is your home?" asked Cora timidly.

"It ought to be. They bought it with my mother's money."

Cora sipped the water, then, feeling weak, she took a mouthful of the milk. Every moment she was becoming stronger. Every moment the strange scene around her was exciting her interest more fully.

"What time is it?" she asked wearily.

"Have you no idea?"

"Is it morning?"

"Almost."

"And you are not in bed?"

"Oh, I sleep when I feel like it. You see, I have nothing else to do."

Cora wondered. Nothing to do?

"Besides, we were waiting up for you, and I could not go to sleep until you came."

"You expected me?"

"For days. We knew you were in the mountains."

"How?" asked Cora.

"Because one of our men followed you. He said you almost caught him."

Cora vaguely remembered the man under the auto when they had been stalled in the hills. That must have been the fellow.

"My friends," stammered Cora, "my brother will be ill of fright, and my mother——"

"Now, my dear," said the queen, "if you will only trust me, I shall do all I can for you. I might even get word to your brother. I love brothers. Once I had one."

"Is he dead?" asked Cora kindly.

"I do not know. You see, I was once a very

silly girl. Would you believe it? I am twenty-five years old!"

"I thought you young, but that is not old."

"Ages. But some day—who can tell what you and I may do?"

In making this remark she mumbled and hissed so that no one, whose eyes were not upon her at the moment she spoke, could have understood her.

Cora took courage. Perhaps she could help this strange creature. Perhaps, after all, the imprisonment might lead to something of benefit.

"I could sleep, if you would like to," said Cora, for her eyes were strangely heavy and her head ached.

"When I finish my cigarette. You see, I am quite dissipated."

She was the picture of luxurious ease—not of dissipation—and as Cora looked at her she was reminded of those highly colored pictures of Cleopatra.

It was, inded, a strange imprisonment, but Cora was passing through a strange experience. Who could tell what would be the end of it all?

Cora's heart was beating wildly. She could not sleep, although her eyes were so heavy, and her head ached fiercely. The reaction from that

powerful drug was setting in, and with that condition came all the protests of an outraged nature. She tossed on her couch. The gypsy queen heard her.

"What is it?" she asked. "Can you not sleep?"

"I don't know," Cora stammered in reply. "I wonder why they took me?"

"You were to appear against Salvo at his trial, I understood. It was necessary to stop you. Perhaps that is one reason," said the gypsy. "But try to sleep."

For some moments there was silence, and Cora dozed off. Suddenly she awoke with a wild start.

"Oh!" she screamed. "Let me go! Jack! Jack!"

"Hush!" whispered the gypsy. "It would not be safe for them to hear you." She pressed her hand to the forehead of the delirious girl. "You must have had a nightmare."

Cora sighed. Then it was not a dream, it was real! She was still a captive.

"Oh, I cannot help it," she sobbed. "If only I could die!" Then she stopped and touched the gentle hand that was stroking her brow. "You must not mind what I say to-night. It has all been so terrible," she finished.

"But I like you, and will be your friend," assured the voice as the other leaned so closely toward her. "Yet, I cannot blame you for suffering. It is only natural. Let me give you some mineral water. That may soothe your nerves."

The light was turned higher, and the form in the white robe flitted over to a cabinet. Cora could see that this gypsy wore a thin, silky robe. It was as white as snow, and in it the young woman looked some living statue.

"I am giving you a great deal of trouble," Cora murmured. "I hope I will be able to repay you some day."

"Oh, as for that, I am glad to have something to do. I have always read of the glory of nursing. Now I may try it. I am very vain and selfish. All I do I do for my own glory. If you are better, and I have made you so, I will be quite satisfied."

She poured the liquid into a glass, and handed it to the sick girl.

"Thank you," whispered Cora. "Now I will sleep. I was only dreaming when I called out."

"They say I have clairvoyant power. I shall put you to sleep."

The gypsy sat down beside Cora. Without touching her face she was passing her hands be-

fore Cora's eyes. The latter wondered if this might not be unsafe. Suppose the gypsy should hypnotize her into sleep and that she might not be able to awaken? Yet the sensation was so soothing! Cora thought, then stopped thinking. Sleep was coming almost as it had come when the man seized her.

Drowsy, delightfully drowsy! Then sleep!

CHAPTER XX

CORA AND HELKA

"WHAT a wonderful morning! It makes me think of the Far East," said the gypsy queen.

"Have you been there?" asked Cora politely.

"Yes, I have been many places," replied Helka, "and to-day I will have a chance to tell you some queer stories about myself. I have a lover."

"Then you are content here? You are not lonely?"

"But I dare not own him as a lover; he is not a gypsy."

"This is America. You should be free."

"Yes," and she sighed. "I wonder shall I ever be able to get away!"

"Shall *I*?"

How strange! Two such beautiful young women prisoners in the heart of the White Mountains!

Cora repeated her question.

"Perhaps," answered Helka. "You see, they

might fear punishment if you escaped; with me it would be—my punishment."

"But what shall I do?" sighed Cora. "Do you really think they intend to keep me here?"

"Is this not a pleasant place?"

"It is indeed—with you. And I am glad that, bad as it is, I have had a chance to know you. I feel some day that I shall have a chance to help you."

"You are a cheerful girl. I was afraid you would put in all your time crying. Then they would take you away."

"No use to cry," replied Cora, as brightly as she could. "Of course, it is dreadful. But, at least, I am not being abused."

"Nor shall you be. The gypsies are not cruel; they are merely revengeful. I think I like them because they are my truest friends in all the whole, wide world."

A tap at the door stopped the conversation. Then a girl entered. She was the one who had been in the van with Cora!

She looked keenly at the captive and smiled.

"Do you wish anything?" she asked of the queen.

"Yes, breakfast to-day must be double. You see, Lena, I have a friend."

"Yes, I see. I am glad she is better."

"Thank you," said Cora, but, of course, she had no way of knowing how this girl had tried to befriend her in the gypsy wagon.

"We have some splendid berries. I picked them before the sun touched them," said Lena. "And fresh milk; also toast, and what else?"

"We will leave it to you, Lena. I know Sam went to market."

"Yes, and will the young lady like some of your robes? I thought that dress might not suit for daylight."

Cora was still wearing her handsome yellow gown that she had worn at the Tip-Top ball. It did look strange in the bright, early morning sunshine.

"Would you?" asked Helka of Cora. "I have a good bathroom, and there is plenty of water." She smiled and showed that wonderful set of teeth. Cora thought she had never before seen such human pearls.

"It is very kind of you," and Cora sighed. "If I must stay I suppose I may as well be practical about it."

"Oh, yes," Lena ventured. "They all like you, and it will be so much better not to give any trouble."

"You see, Lena knows," said the queen. "Yes, Lena, get out something pretty, and Miss——"

"Cora," supplied the prisoner.

"Cora? What an odd name! But it suits you. There is so much coral in your cheeks. Yes, Miss Cora must wear my English robe—the one with the silver crown."

To dress in the robes of a gypsy queen! If only this were a play, and not so tragically real!

But the thought was not comforting. It meant imprisonment. Cora had determined to be brave, but it was hard. Yet she must hope that something unexpected would happen to rescue her.

"Lena is my maid," explained Helka. "I tell her more than any of the others. And she fetches my letters secretly. Have you not one for me today, Lena?"

The girl slipped her hand in her blouse and produced a paper. The queen grasped it eagerly. "Oh, yes," she said, "I knew he would write. Good David!" and she tore open the envelope. Cora watched her face and guessed that the missive was from the lover. Lena went out to bring the breakfast things.

"If only I could go out and meet him!" said the queen, finishing the letter. "I would run away

and marry him. He has been so good to wait so long. Just think! He has followed me from England!"

"And you never meet him?"

"Not since they suspect. It was then they bought the two fierce dogs. I would never dare pass them. Sometimes they ask me to take a ride in the big wagon, but I never could ride in that. You see, I am not all a gypsy. My father was a sort of Polish nobleman and my mother was part English. She became interested in the great question of the poor, and so left society for this—the free life. My father was also a reformer, and they were married twice—to make sure. It is my father's money that keeps me like this, and, of course, the tribe does not want to lose me."

"And this man David?"

"I met him when I rode like a queen in an open chariot in a procession. That is, he saw me, and, like the queens in the old stories, he managed to get a note to me. Then I had him come to the park we were quartered in. And since then—but it does seem so long!"

"Could not Lena take a letter for me?" asked Cora timidly.

"Oh, no! They would punish her very severely if she interfered in your case. You see, Salvo

must be avenged and released from jail. I always hated Salvo!"

Cora was silent. Presently the girl returned and placed the linen tablecloth on the floor. Following her came the other girl, with a tray of things. It was strange to see them set the table on the floor, but Cora remembered that this was a custom of the wanderers. When the breakfast had been arranged, the queen slipped down beside her coffee like a creature devoid of bones. She was very graceful and agile—like some animal of the forest. Cora took her place, with limbs crossed, and felt like a Turk. But the repast was not uninviting. The berries were fresh, and the milk was in a clean bowl; in fact, everything showed that the queen's money had bought the service.

They talked and ate. Helka was very gay, the letter must have contained cheering news, and Cora was reminded how much she would have loved to have had a single word from one of her dear ones. But she must hope and wait.

"Do take some water cress," pressed the strange hostess, possibly noting that Cora ate little. "I think this cress in America is one of your real luxuries. We have never before camped at a place where it could be gathered fresh from the

spring." Daintily she laid some on the green salad on a thin slice of the fresh bread, and after offering the salt and pepper, placed the really "civilized" sandwich on the small plate beside Cora. "There is just one thing I should love to go into the world for," said the queen. "I would love to have my meals at a hotel. I am *savagely* fond of eating."

"We had such a splendid hotel," answered Cora with a sigh. "It seems a mockery that I cannot invite you there with me—that even I cannot go myself. I keep turning the matter over and over in my mind, and the more I think the more impossible it all seems."

"Nothing is impossible in Gypsy land," replied the queen, helping herself to some berries. "And it may even not be impossible to do as you suggest. But we must wait," and she smiled prettily. "You have a very great habit of haste; feverish haste, the books call it. I believe it is worse for one's complexion than are cigarettes. Let me begin making a Gypsy of you by teaching you to wait. You have a great deal to wait for."

Cora glanced around her to avoid the eyes of the speaker. Surely she did have a great deal to wait for. "Do you stay in doors all the time?" she asked, glad to think of some leading question.

"I should think that would hurt your complexion."

"We often walk in the grounds. You see, we own almost all the woods, but I am afraid they will not trust you yet. You will have to promise me that you will not try to escape if I ask that you be allowed to walk with me soon," said Helka.

"I could not promise that," Cora replied sadly.

"Oh, I suppose not now. I will not ask you. We will just be good friends. And I will tell you about David. It is delightful to have some one whom I can trust to tell about him."

"And I will tell you about my friends! Perhaps I will not be so lonely if I talk of them."

Cora was now strong enough in nerve and will to observe her surroundings. The room was very large, and was undoubtedly used formerly as a billiard parlor, for it was situated in the top of the big house, and on all sides were windows, even a colored glass skylight in the roof. The floors were of hardwood and covered partially with foreign rugs. There were low divans, but no tables nor chairs. The whole scene was akin to that described as oriental. Lena returned with the robes for Cora, and laid them on a divan. Then she adjusted a screen, thus forming a dressing room in one corner. This corner was hung with an oblong mirror, framed in won-

derful ebony. Helka saw that this attracted Cora's attention.

"You are wondering about my glass? It was a gift from my father to my mother, and is all I have left of her beautiful things. It has been very difficult to carry that about the world."

"It is very handsome and very massive," remarked Cora.

"Yes, I love black things; I like ebony. They called my mother Bonnie, for she had ebony eyes and hair."

"So have you," said Cora.

"I am glad you are dark; it will make it easier, and the tribe will think you are safer. I really would like to get you back to your friends, but then I should lose you. And I don't see, either, how it ever could be managed unless they want to let you go."

Cora sighed heavily. Then she prepared to don the garb of the gypsy queen!

CHAPTER XXI

MOTHER HULL

"MOTHER HULL wants to talk with you, Helka."

"She must send her message by you," said Helka to Lena. "I never get along with Mother Hull."

Cora gasped, and then sighed the sigh of relief. Would that dreadful old woman enter the room and perhaps insult her?

"She is very—cross," ventured Lena.

"No more so than I am. Tell her to send her message."

"But if she will not?"

"Then I will not hear it."

"There may be trouble."

"I have my laws."

The girl left the room, evidently not satisfied.

Presently there was a shuffling of aged feet in the big, bare outside hall. Helka turned, and her eyes flashed angrily.

"Go behind the screen," she said to Cora. "If

she wants to see you, she must have my permission."

At that the door opened, and the old gypsy woman entered.

"I told you not to come," said Helka.

"But I had to. It is——"

She stopped and looked over the room carefully.

"Oh, she is here," said the queen, "but you are not to see her."

"Why?"

"Because I have said so. You know my laws."

The old woman looked as if she would like to have struck down the daring young queen. But her clinched fist was hidden in her apron.

"Helka, if they take this house they take you."

"Who is going to take it now?"

"The new tribe. They have sent word. We must give in or they govern."

The new tribe! That might mean more freedom for Helka. But she must be cautious—this old woman was the backbone of all the tribes, and every word she spoke might mean good or evil to all the American gypsies. She was all-powerful, in spite of Helka's pretended power.

"They cannot take my house," said Helka finally. "I have the oath of ownership."

The woman shook her head. All the while her eyes were searching for Cora, and she knew very well that the stolen girl was back of that screen. She wanted to see her, to know what she looked like in daylight; also to know how she was behaving.

"What did she say about Salvo?" hissed the woman.

"She says nothing of him. Why should she? Salvo did wrong. He should be sent to jail."

This was a daring remark, and Helka almost wished she had not made it. The eyes of the old woman fairly blazed with anger.

"You—you dare—to speak that way!"

Helka nodded her head with apparent unconcern.

"Why not?"

"There is always—revenge. I might take your girl friend farther into the mountains. That would leave you time to behave."

"Have we so many houses?" almost sneered the younger woman.

"There are holes, and caves and rivers," answered the woman, with the plain intention of frightening the disloyal one into submission.

"We left off that sort of thing when we came to America," replied Helka undaunted. "I will

take care of this prisoner. I have agreed to."

The old woman shuffled up nearer to the screen. Cora felt as if she must cry out or faint, but Helka spoke quickly.

"Don't you dare to step one inch nearer," she said, assuming a voice of power. "I have told you to go!"

A dog was barking fiercely under the window.

"They will watch," said the old woman, meaning that the dogs would stay on guard if Cora should attempt escape.

"Oh, I know that," answered Helka. "But I have told you to go!"

Cora was trembling. She remembered the voice, although she was too deeply under the effects of the chloroform when in the wagon to recall more of this woman.

"I only came to warn you," said the woman.

"You are always warning," and Helka laughed. "I am afraid, Mother Hull, that we will begin to doubt your warnings. This young girl makes an admirable gypsy, yet you warned me so much before she came."

The woman stooped over and whispered into Helka's ear. "And I warn you now," she said, "that if she gets away I will not save you from Sam. *You* will *marry* him."

"Go away instantly," commanded the queen, springing up like an infuriated animal. "I have told you that before I will marry Sam I will—I will—— He sent you to threaten me! I——"

"Helka! Helka!" soothed the woman, "be careful—what you say."

"You leave me! I could throw myself from this window," and she went toward the open casement.

"There now, girl! Mother Hull was always good to you——"

"Go!"

The hag shuffled to the door. Turning, she watched Helka and looked toward the screen. Helka never moved, but stood like a tragedy queen, her finger pointing to the door.

It was exactly like a scene in a play. Cora was very frightened, for she could see plainly through the hinge spaces of her hiding place.

When there was no longer a step to be heard in the hall, Helka sank down on the floor and laughed as merrily as if she had been playing some absurd game.

Cora was amazed to hear that girl laugh.

"Were you frightened?" Helka asked.

"A little," replied Cora, "she has such a dreadful face."

"Like a witch," admitted Helka. "That is why she is so powerful—she can frighten every one with her face."

"And the new tribe she spoke of?"

"Has, I believe, a beautiful queen, and they are always trying to make me jealous. But since I have seen you, I care less for my gypsy life."

"I am glad! I hope we may both soon go out in the beautiful, free world, and then you could meet David——"

"Hush! I heard a step! Lie down and pretend illness."

Again Cora did as she was commanded. It did seem as if all were commands in this strange world.

There was a tap at the door.

"Enter!" called Helka.

A very young girl stepped into the room timidly.

"Sam sent this," she said, then turned and ran away.

Helka opened the cigar box. "Cigarettes, I suppose," she said. Then she smiled. "Why, it's a present—a bracelet. I suppose Sam found this as he finds everything else he sends me—in other people's pockets. Well, it is pretty, and I shall keep it. I love bracelets."

She clasped the trinket on her white arm. It was pretty, and Cora had no doubt that it had been stolen, but as well for Helka to keep it as to try to do anything better with it.

"I should like to give it to *you*," said the queen suddenly. She took off the bracelet and examined it closely.

"Oh, I really couldn't take it," objected Cora.

"I know what you think, but suppose you got out some time? This might lead to——"

"Oh, I see. You need not speak more plainly. Perhaps when I go I may ask you for it!"

"It has a name inside. Betty——"

"Betty!" exclaimed Cora.

"Do you know a Betty?"

"Indeed, I do! She was with us when——"

"Then that was when Sam found it. The name is Betty Rand!"

"Oh, do you think they have harmed Betty?" and Cora grew pale.

"Bless you, no! I heard that the girls had been searching the woods for you. She may have dropped it——"

"Oh, I hope so. Dear Betty!" and Cora's eyes welled up. "What would I not give to see them all!"

"Well, now, dear, you must not be impatient.

See, I am reforming. I have not smoked to-day. And that is something that has not occurred in years. If you should make a lady out of a savage, would you think your time ill spent?"

Cora gathered up the robe she wore. It did seem as if she had been in gypsy land so long! She was almost familiar now with its strange ways and customs.

"You are not a savage, and I love your music. If you come out into the world, I am going to take you among my friends. We all have some musical education, but you have musical talent."

"Do you really think so? David loves music. Shall I sing?"

"Are you not afraid of that old woman?" asked Cora.

"Not in the least. Besides, if I sing she will think all is well." She took up her guitar. But after running her fingers across the strings she laid it down again.

"Tell me," she spoke suddenly, "about your mother. I hope she will not worry too much. If ever I knew my sweet mother I should be willing to live in a cave all my life."

Cora had always heard girls speak this way of lost mothers. Yes, it was sweet to have one—to know one.

"My mother is a brave woman," said Cora. "She will never give up until all hope is gone."

"I know she is brave, for you must be like her. And your brother?"

"He will miss me," answered Cora brokenly, for she could not even speak of Jack without being affected.

The great, dark eyes of the gypsy looked out into the forest. Cora wondered of what she could be thinking.

"Jack," she repeated, "Jack what?"

"Jack Kimball," replied Cora, still wondering.

"That sounds like a brave name," remarked the queen. "I am getting spoiled, I'm afraid. I cannot help being interested in the outside world."

"Why should you not be?" asked Cora.

"Because I do not belong to it. To be content one must not be too curious. That, I believe, is philosophy, and——"

"There is some one coming," interrupted Cora.

"It is Lena. I am like the blind. I know every one's step."

And she was not mistaken, for a moment later Lena entered the room.

CHAPTER XXII

SADDENED HEARTS

"I AM afraid she is dead."

"Jack, you must not give up so easily. The detectives have faith in the steamship story." Ed was speaking.

"No, Cora would not be induced, under any circumstance, to take a Portland boat, and she could not have been taken away unconscious."

"Girls before this have been led away with fake tales of a sick mother, and all that," said Ed feebly, "but I must agree with you—Cora was too level-headed."

"And Belle is really very ill."

"Mr. Rand has sent for a nurse. Belle feels as if she must die if Cora is not found soon. She is extremely sensitive."

"Yes, the girls loved Cora."

His voice broke and he turned his head away. The two young men were seated on the big piazza of the Tip-Top. It was just a week since the

disappearance of Cora, and, of course, Mrs. Kimball had been notified by cable. She would return to America by the first steamer, but would not reach New York for some days yet. In the meantime Mr. Rand, who had turned out to be such a good friend in need, had advised Mrs. Kimball to wait a few days more before starting. He hoped and felt sure that some news of the girl would have been discovered by that time.

"Walter 'phoned from Lenox," went on Ed, after a pause. "He had no real information, and the young girl at the sanitarium is not Cora."

"I was afraid it was a useless journey. Well, let us see if we can do anything for the girls," and Jack arose languidly from the bench. "Misery likes company."

They went up to the suite of rooms occupied by the young ladies. Hazel met them in the hall.

"Whom do you think is coming to nurse Belle? Miss Robbins!"

"What?" exclaimed both in one breath.

"Yes, Mr. Rand insisted that she is the proper person, and it seems there is some reasonable explanation for her conduct. At any rate, it is well we will have some one we know. Oh, dear, Belle is so hysterical!" and Hazel herself was almost in tears.

"When is Miss Robbins coming?" asked Jack.

"Mr. Rand 'phoned, and she said she would come up at once. Then he sent his car out from his own garage for her."

"What would we have done without Mr. Rand?"

"Come in and speak to Belle," said Hazel. "She feels better when she has talked with you, Jack. Of course, you come also, Ed," she hurried to add, seeing him draw back.

The young men entered the room, where Belle, pale as a drooping white rose, lay on a couch under the window. She smiled and extended her hand.

"I am so glad you have come! Is there any news?"

"Walter is running down a sanitarium clew," said Jack evasively. "I feel certain Cora is ill somewhere."

"Where has he gone?"

"To Lenox. We had a description from a sanitarium there. But, Belle, you must brace up. We can't afford to lose two girls."

She smiled, and did try to look brighter, but the shock to her nerves had been very severe. "Did you hear that Miss Robbins is coming?" she asked.

"Yes, and I think she is the very one we need," replied Ed. "She may even be able to help us in our search."

"She is wonderfully clever, and it seems she did not mean to desert us at all. There is some sort of story back of her attention to the wounded ones at Restover," said Bess, who had been sitting at a little desk, busy with some mail.

A hall boy tapped at the door and announced that some one wished to see Mr. Kimball.

"Come along, Ed," said Jack. "You represent us."

In the hotel office they met two detectives sent by Mr. Rand. They explained that they would have to have a picture of Cora to use in the press, for the purpose of getting help from the public by any possible identification.

At first Jack objected, but Ed showed him that this move was necessary. So it was, with other matters, very painful for the young man to arrange with the strangers, where his sister's private life was concerned. Jack soon disposed of his part of the interview. He declared that Cora had no gentleman friends other than his own companions; also that she had never had any romantic notions about the stage or such sensational matters. In seeking all the information

they could possibly obtain, that might assist in getting at a clew, the detectives, of course, were obliged to ask these and other questions.

"Has all the wood been searched?" asked Jack.

"Every part, even the caves," replied the detective. "We visited several bands of gypsies, but could not hold them—they cleared themselves."

"But the gypsies had threatened her," insisted Jack. "Could any have left the country by way of Boston?"

"Impossible. We have had all New York and New England roads carefully watched."

"And there are no old huts anywhere? It has always seemed to me that these huts one finds in every woods might make safe hiding places for criminals," said Jack.

"Well, we are still at it, and will report to you every day," said the elder man. "We have put our best men on the case, and have the hearty coöperation of all the newspaper men. They know how to follow up clews."

"Of course," agreed Jack. "There was nothing in the Chelton rumor. I knew that was only a bit of sensationalism."

"There was something in it," contradicted the detective, "but the trouble was we could not get

further than the old gypsy woman's threat. She had told your sister to beware of interfering with that jailed fellow, Salvo. I believed there was some connection between her disapearance and that case, but, after talking to every one who knew anything about the gypsy band, we had to drop that clew for a time. There are no more of the tribe anywhere in the county, as far as we can learn."

"And they have not been around here since the day they moved away, when we were travelling over the mountains," went on Jack. "Of course you have, as you say, taken care of all the ends, but the arrest of that fellow seems the most reasonable motive."

"Had Miss Kimball any girl enemies? Any who might like to—well, would it be possible for them to induce her to go away, on some pretext, so that she might be detained?" asked the other detective.

Jack and Ed exchanged glances. There was a girl, an Ida Giles, of whom, in the other books of this series, we were obliged to record some very unpleasant things. She was an enemy of Cora's. But the detective's idea was absurd. Ida Giles would have no part in any such conspiracy.

"No girl would do anything like that," declared

Jack emphatically. The sleuths of the law arose to go.

"Thank you for your close attention," said Ed. "We certainly have fallen among friends in our trouble. The fact that I left her alone——"

"Now, Ed, please stop that," interrupted Jack. "We have told you that it didn't matter whom she was with, the thing would have happened just the same. Any one would have fallen a victim to the false message."

Again for the detectives' information the strange man who called Ed into the hotel office was described. But of what avail was that? He was easier to hide than was Cora, and both were safely hidden, it seemed.

Finally, having exhausted their skill in the way of obtaining clews, the officers left, while the two young men, alone once more, were struggling to pull themselves together, that the girls might still have hope that there was a possibility of some favorable news.

"It looks bad," almost sobbed Jack, for the interview with the officers had all but confirmed his worst fears, that of throwing more suspicion upon the Gypsy tribe.

Ed was silent. He did not like to think of Cora in the clutch of those unscrupulous persons. The

thought was like a knife to him. Jack saw his chum's new alarm and tried to brighten up.

The door suddenly opened. Both young men started.

A young woman entered the office.

"Mr. Kimball, Mr. Foster!" she exclaimed, as the boys looked at her in surprise. "I am so sorry!"

It was Miss Robbins.

"We are very glad to see you," said Jack. "We need all sorts of doctors. Belle is very ill, and the others are not far from it."

"And Cora?" she asked anxiously.

"No news," said Jack, as cheerfully as he could.

"Listen. I must tell you while I have a chance —before I see the girls. The man I stayed over to nurse is my brother!"

CHAPTER XXIII

ANOTHER STORY

"Oh, Miss Robbins!" exclaimed Belle.

"My dear! I am so sorry to see you ill!"

"Yes, but Cora——"

"Hush, my dear. You will not get strong while you worry so. Of course, you cannot stop at once, but you must try."

Hazel, Betty and Bess had withdrawn. What a relief it was already to have some one who just knew how to control Belle. It had been so difficult for the young girls to try to console her, and her nerves had worked so sadly upon their own.

"I suppose you thought I was a perfectly dreadful young woman," said Dr. Robbins cheerily. "But you did not know (she sighed effectively) that every one has her own troubles, while a doctor has her own and a whole lot of others."

"Had you trouble?" Belle asked sympathetically.

"Indeed I had, and still have. You should know. But wait, I'll just call the girls in and make a clean breast of it. It will save me further trouble."

The tactful young doctor had planned to tell her story as much for the purpose of diverting Belle's mind as for any other reason. She called to the girls, who were in an adjoining room. How the strain of that one dreadful week had told upon their fresh young faces! Bess had almost lost her peach-blow; Hazel, never highly colored, but always bright of eye, showed signs even of pallor; Betty had put on too much color, that characteristic of the excitable disposition when the skin is the thermometer of the nerves, and her eyes not only sparkled, but actually glittered. All this was instantly apparent to the trained eye of the young doctor.

"Come in, girls," she said. "I have decided to make a full confession."

They looked at her in astonishment. What could she mean? Might she have married the sick man? This thought flashed into the mind of more than one of the party.

"You thought I deserted you?" began Miss Robbins.

"It looked like it," murmured Bess.

"Well, when I went out on that lawn to work over the injured, I found there a long-lost brother!"

"Brother?"

"Yes, really. It is a strange story, but for three years mother and I have tried every means to find Leland. He was such a beautiful young fellow, and such a joy to us, but he got interested in social problems, and got to thinking that the poor were always oppressed, and all that sort of thing. Well, he had just finished college, and we hoped for such great things, when, after some warning enthusiasm, he disappeared."

"Ran away?" asked Hazel.

"Well, we thought at first he was drowned, for he used to sit for hours on the beach talking to fishermen. But I never thought he had met with any such misfortune. Leland is one of the individuals born to live. He is too healthy, too splendid, a chap to up and die. Of course, mother thought he must be dead, or he would not keep her in anxiety, but that is the way these reformer minds usually work—spare your own and lose the cause."

"And what did happen?" asked Betty, all interested.

"I happened to find him. There he lay, with his

wonderful blond hair burned in ugly spots, and his baby complexion almost——"

"Oh! are all his good looks gone?" gasped Belle—she who always stood up for the beautiful in everything, even in young men.

"I hope not gone forever," said the doctor, "but, indeed, poor boy, he had a narrow escape."

"But whatever took him into the kitchen?" asked Bess.

"He went down there among the foreigners to study actual conditions. Did you ever hear of anything so idiotic? But that is his hobby. He has been into all kinds of labor during these three long, sorrowful years."

"And you were helping your own brother! And we—blamed you!" It was Belle who spoke.

"I could not blame you for so doing. I had been enjoined to secrecy the very moment poor Leland laid his eyes on me. He begged me not even to send word to mother, as he said it would spoil the research of an entire year if he had to stop his work before the summer was entirely over."

"But he could not work—he is ill?" said Bess.

"Still, you see, he could keep among the men he had classed himself with, and that is his idea of duty. I let mother know I had found him in

spite of his 'ideas,' but I did not tell her much more."

"Will he not go home with you?" asked Hazel.

"He has promised to give up cooking by October first. Then I am going to collect him."

"What an interesting young man he must be," remarked Belle, to whom the story had already brought some brightness.

"Oh, indeed he is," declared Miss Robbins. "He is younger than I, and when I went to college he promised to do all sorts of stunts to prove my problems. He even wanted to try living, or dying, on one sort of food; wanted to remain up without sleeping until he fell over; wanted to sleep in dark cellars to see what effect that would have; in fact, I thought we would have to lock him up with a bodyguard to save his life, he was so enthusiastic about my profession. And as to anti-vivisection! Why, at one time he had twenty-five cats and four dogs in our small city yard to save them from the possible fate of some of their kind. I tell you, we had our hands full with pretty Leland."

"I should love him," said Belle suddenly and emphatically.

Every one laughed. It was actually the first real smile that had broken the sadness of their

lives in that long, dreary week. Belle returned the charge with a contemptuous glance.

"I mean, of course, I should love him as a friend of humanity," she answered.

"Cats and dogs!" exclaimed Betty.

"A friend of dumb animals is always a friend of humans," insisted Belle.

Dr. Robbins smiled. Her cure was already working, and, while her story was correct, the recital of it had done more for those girls than had any other attempted cure of their melancholy.

"Well, I cannot agree with you that one fond of animals—that is excessively fond—is always very fond of mankind," she said. "Still, in Leland's case, it was a curious mixture of both."

"He will become a great man," prophesied Hazel.

"If he does not kill himself in the trying," said the sister. "He came too near it in the fire. But suppose he should insist on—on digging sewers?"

"Oh, you could restrain him. That would be insane!" declared Bess.

"I don't know about that. Sewers have to be dug," contended Leland's sister.

"I wish we might meet him," ventured Bess. "I am sure he would be an inspiration."

Poor Bess! Always saying things backwards. He would be an inspiration—in digging sewers!

"Well, you may some day, if he ever consents to become civilized again," said Dr. Robbins. "You see, he may take to the lecture platform, but very likely the platform will be against his principles. He will want to shout from the housetops!"

A step in the hall attracted them. It was Ed.

"Jack and I are going to town," he said, his face flushed with excitement. "The detectives claim to have a clew."

"Oh, good! I knew Dr. Robbins would bring luck," declared Belle, actually springing up from the couch. "I am going out in the air. I feel as if Cora were here already!"

"Easy, Belle," cautioned the doctor. "We must insist upon discipline for your mind and body. You must not waste energy. It is well to be hopeful, but bad to get excited."

"But I can't help it."

"Now, girls, we will let you know at once over the 'phone if we have any news," promised Ed, making his adieux. "We really are hopeful."

Hope, as contagious as fear, had sprung into the heart of each of them. Yes, there must soon be news of Cora!

CHAPTER XXIV

THE COLLAPSE

"WE ARE to go out to-day!" Helka's face was beaming when she gave this news to Cora. The latter had longed so for the sunshine since shut up in the big upper room.

"Out where?"

"In the grounds, of course. They do not let us on the highway."

"And does that satisfy you? You could go—if you chose."

"Well, I could, and I could not. I would be afraid if I ran away that old Mother Hull's face would kill me in my sleep. She is a dreadful woman."

"But that is superstitious. No dream can kill. I wish that was all that held me here," and Cora sighed deeply.

"But you have promised not to try to escape while you are in my charge," Helka reminded her. "And surely you will keep that promise!" There

was alarm in her voice. Helka had not told Cora all of her fears.

"Yes, I will not run away from you. I doubt if I could do so, at any rate."

"Indeed, you could not, but you might be foolish enough to try. I keep hoping for you all the time."

"You are very good to me, Helka, and I hope that whatever becomes of me I will not lose you entirely. But sometimes I have a fearful dread. I feel as if I will choke from actual fear."

"I don't blame you. The faces of some of our tribe are enough to strangle one. But I have promised to take care of you, and you need fear no violence, at any rate."

They were seated on the floor, as usual. Presently Lena appeared.

"Fetch the walking dresses—the brown and the black," said Helka. "We are going out in the woods."

"Sam did not go to town," ventured Lena.

"Why?" asked the queen sharply.

"I don't know. He asked if you were going out."

"Indeed! Perhaps he expects to walk with us. Well, don't hurry with the things. We have all day."

Cora was disappointed. The very thought of getting out of doors had brought her hope—hope that some one might see her, hope for something so vague she could not name it.

"Can't we go out this morning?" she asked. "The day is so delightful."

Helka gave her a meaning glance. "I wish Sam would bring me some fruit," she said to Lena. "Tell him I have not had any for days, and say that the last—from the farm was delicious."

"All right," assented Lena, "I think he—will go."

"I think he will," agreed Helka. "He never fails me when I ask for anything. Sam is ambitious."

She was bright and cheery again. Yes, they would take their walk, and Cora would be out in the great, free, wide world once more.

"How do you manage to get such up-to-date clothes?" she asked Helka, as she inspected the tailor-made walking dress of really good cut and material.

"Why, I have a girl friend in New York who sends by express a new gown each season. You see, it would not do for me to attract attention when I am out in the grounds."

"But, if you did attract attention, would not that possibly help you to get away?"

"My dear, the situation is very complex. You see, I have a respectable lover, and I live every day in hopes of some time joining him. Should our band get into disrepute, which it surely would do if discovered here, I should feel disgraced. Besides"—and she looked very serious—"there are other reasons why I cannot make any desperate move for freedom."

Cora thought it wise not to press her further. It was a strange situation, but surely the woman was honest and kind, and had befriended Cora in her darkest hour. What more could she ask now?

Helka gave Cora a choice of the dresses, and she took the black costume. There was scarcely any perceptible difference in their sizes, and when gowned Helka declared Cora looked *"chic."* Helka herself looked quite the society lady, her tight-fitting brown costume suiting her admirably.

Cora was trembling with anticipation. She wondered if they would be allowed to roam about at will, or how they would be guarded. Finally Helka was ready.

"We will have Lena with us—that is, she will be supposed to be with us. Then—but you must

wait and see. It is rather odd, but it is better than being indoors." Helka rang her bell and Lena appeared.

"We are ready," she said simply, and again the girl was gone.

It seemed ages, but really was but a short time before Lena returned.

"All right," she said, "the door is opened, and the dogs are gone."

It was the first time Cora had been out in the hall, and she looked around in wonderment. It was dark and dirty, so different from Helka's apartment. Lena led the way. There were three flights of stairs.

"You girls do not do too much sweeping," complained the queen, as she lifted her skirts. "I should think you would have had Christine brush down these steps."

"I told her to, but Mother Hull sent her for berries," explained Lena.

They passed along, and finally reached the outer door. The fresh air blew upon them.

"Oh!" exclaimed Cora. "Isn't it good to be in the open air?"

"Hush!" whispered Helka. "It is best that you make no remarks. I will tell you why later."

Mother Hull was crouched at the steps. She looked up first at Helka, then at Cora. My, what eyes! No wonder Helka said they might kill one in a dream.

Down the steps and at last on the ground! Cora's feet fairly tingled. Helka tripped along lightly ahead of her. Two ordinary-looking men were working on the grounds. The place seemed just like any other country house that might be old and somewhat neglected, but there was not the slightest evidence of it being an abode of crime or of gypsies.

"This way, Cora," said Helka. "There is a splendid path through the woods this way. I love to gather the tinted leaves there."

As they turned the men also turned and made their work fit in exactly to the way the girls were going.

"Our guard," whispered Helka. "They will not speak to us, but they never take their eyes off us. I don't mind them, but I hate the dogs. They never call them unless they fear I might speak with a stranger."

"What sort of dogs are they?" asked Cora eagerly.

"I don't know; not thoroughbreds, I can tell

you that. I could make friends with any decent dog, but these—must be regular tramps. I hate them."

Cora, too, thought she might have made friends with any "decent" dogs, but she had the same fear that Helka spoke of regarding mongrels.

A roadway was not too distant to be seen. If only some one would come along, thought Cora, some one who might hear her voice! But if she should shout! They might both be attacked by those savage dogs.

"Oh, see those gentian," exclaimed Helka. "I always think of David's eyes when I find gentian. They are as blue and as sweet and——"

"Why, Helka! You leave me nothing to say for my fair-eyed friends. They have eyes, every one of them. Here are Betty's," and she grasped a sprig of a wonderful blue blossom. "And here are dear, darling Belle's," picking up a spray of myrtle in bloom, "and here are the brown eyes of Bess," at which remark the eyes of Cora Kimball could hardly look at the late, brown daisy, because of a mist of tears.

"All girls!" exclaimed Helka wonderingly.

"Oh, I know *some* boys," replied Cora, running along and noting that the men with the dogs

MOTHER HULL WAS CROUCHED AT THE STEPS. SHE LOOKED UP FIRST AT HELKA, THEN AT CORA.

were close by. "Jack is dark. I really could not tell the color of his eyes!"

"And he is your brother!"

"The very reason," said Cora with something like a laugh. "Now I know that Walter has eyes like his hair, and his hair is not like anything else."

"But Ed's?" and at this Helka smiled prettily. "I had an idea that Ed's eyes were sort of composite. A bit of love, that would be blue," and she picked up a late violet, "a bit of faith, gray for that," and she found a spray of wild geranium, "and a bit of black for steadfast honor. There! I must find a black-eyed Susan," and at this she actually ran away from Cora, and left the frightened girl with the men and dogs too close to her heels for comfort.

For a moment Cora wanted to scream. She was too nervous to remember that she had been promised security by Helka: all she knew, and all she felt, was danger, and danger to her was now a thing unbearable.

"Helka! Helka!" she called wildly.

The other girl, running nymph-like through the woods, turned at the call, and putting her hands in trumpet shape to her lips, answered as do school girls and boys when out of reach of

the more conventional forms of conversation.

"Here I am," came the reply. "What is it, Cora?"

"Wait for me," screamed the frightened girl, while those dreadful dogs actually sniffed at her heels.

Cora felt just then that the strain of being so near freedom, and yet so far from it, was even worse than being in the big room.

"I know where there are some beautiful fall wild flowers," said Helka. "We may walk along for a good distance yet. These grounds are mine, you know."

"If they were only mine!" Cora could not help expressing.

"You see, my dear, I owe something to my dear, dead mother. She loved this life."

"But your father. Did he?"

"I can't say. I wish I might find him. He is not really dead."

"Not dead!"

"No. I say so at times because we call certain conditions death, but I do believe my father lives —abroad."

"And he is a nobleman?"

"You folks would call him that, but he is not one of us."

"How strange that you should be so bound by traditions! And you know your lover—is not one of you."

"Oh, yes, he is. That is what makes him love me. He is called a socialist. He is not a gypsy, but he will not be bound by conventionalities."

"But suppose he knew of this crime?"

"We do not admit it is a crime to hold you for the release of Salvo. They cannot convict him of the robbery if you do not appear against him. It is a sort of justice."

It was very vague justice to Cora, and she knew perfectly well the argument would have little weight with her friends, should she ever meet them again.

But she must meet them! She must induce this girl—for she really was nothing more than a misinformed girl—she must induce her to escape!

If only she could get a letter to David!

If only Lena would take one for her!

My, how her heart beat! Helka was picking flowers, but Cora was looking out on that roadway.

An automobile dashed by.

"Oh!" exclaimed Cora, clutching Helka's arm. "I cannot stand it! I must call or go mad!"

The dead leaves tried to move! Something

stirred them to unnatural life. There was a shuffling of feet! A riot of fear! Chipmunks scampered off! But the girl lay there!

"Cora! Cora, dear!" wailed Helka. "Try to live! I cannot lose you! Oh, Cora, I must make you live!"

But the form on the dead grass was lifeless. The automobile had dashed by. A cloud of dust was all that was left to mark its path.

"Cora! Cora!" almost screamed Helka. "Wake up! They are coming!"

The prostrate girl seemed to moan.

Then they did come.

Cora was apparently dead!

CHAPTER XXV

THE AWAKENING

"WHAT did I do? Did I—did they—oh, tell me?"

Helka was leaning over Cora as the girl regained consciousness. It was night, and the room was quite dark.

"You did nothing, dear, but faint. That was not your fault. Take another sip of this milk. Do you feel better?"

"Yes, but I was so afraid that I screamed, and that they—those dreadful men would punish you."

"Not afraid for yourself?"

"Not if I could not help it. But you had nothing to do with it. Oh, Helka, I will die if I am not soon set free! I can't stand it."

She burst into hysterical tears. Cora Kimball was losing strength, and with it her courage was failing.

"How could you escape?"

The words came slowly. Helka was thinking deeply.

"Could we get Lena to take a note to David? He would surely rescue us."

"But then—they might pour out vengeance upon him. I could not take the risk of anything happening to David."

"You are too timid, Helka. Such straits as we are in demand risks."

"We might poison those horrible, savage dogs. Lena might do that without her own knowledge. I could fix something. Do you know anything about poisons?"

"Not much," replied Cora, "but I suppose if we got anything sure to be poison it would do." Hope sprang into her heart. "How did you get me indoors?"

"They carried you. The air was too strong for you after such close confinement."

"No, it was that automobile on the road. The sight of it simply overpowered me. Oh, how I wanted to call to those in it!"

"Poor girl! Since you came I, too, have wanted to be free, and I am not as much afraid as I used to be."

"We are in America, and have no right to

fear." Cora thought at the same time that probably her own fearlessness accounted for her present plight.

"If we could poison the dogs, and then slide down from one of these windows in the dark, perhaps we could get away," said Helka. "But what would happen when we found ourselves out in the dark woods? If they found us——"

"There must be no 'if.' They must not find us. I am afraid of nothing but of this imprisonment."

"Well, we will see. To-morrow I will get Lena to go to town for me, and perhaps we may be able to arrange something."

"And you will not write to your David?"

"Don't you think that dangerous?"

"The very safest thing, for he is a man, and how could they injure him?"

"And so handsome and so strong! He is like some grand old prince—his hair is like corn-silk and his eyes are like the blue sky," and Helka, as she reclined, with her chin in her hands, upon her couch, almost forgot that Cora was with her.

"Then you will write to-morrow? Tell him to come to the end of the path at the west road by ten to-morrow night, and if we are not there we will leave a note so that he will see it."

"How quickly you plan! What about the dogs?"

"Lena will fetch the stuff to-morrow morning, and they will be dead by night. Then we will tie a rope to the window-sill or some strong place, and we will slip down. Oh, Helka, I will go down first, and go out first, and if they do not miss me, they will not miss you. It will be safe to follow me as quickly as you see I am off!"

Cora threw her arms about the gypsy queen. As she spoke it seemed as if they were already free!

"And when we meet David! Oh, my dear Cora, now you have made me—mad! Now I, too, will risk life to get away! I must go out into your world—David's world!"

"Then we must both sleep, and be strong. To-morrow we will be very good to every one. I will be well, and if I cannot eat I will pretend to. Lately I have almost choked on my food." Cora sipped the milk and then fell back exhausted.

"I nearly forgot your illness, I became so excited with our plans. Do you know when you fainted they were all very much frightened? They would not like to have you die!"

"But they might easily bury me. I should think that would be safer."

"No, it is very hard to bury one. Somehow they find the dead more difficult to hide than they do the living. I guess the good spirits take care of the dead."

"And *we* must take care of ourselves! Well, that may be. At any rate, I am glad I did not die. Oh, Helka, if you only could know my brother Jack. He is the noblest boy! And our girls! You know, we are called the motor girls, don't you?"

"And you all own automobiles! I have never been in an automobile in my life," sighed Helka.

"But you are going to ride in mine—in the *Whirlwind!* Doesn't that name suit you? It sounds so like your gypsy names. Why did you say they call you Helka?"

"Well, I wanted something Polish. Holka means girl, so I changed it a little. My father called me his Holka."

"How do you know that?"

"From my mother's old letters. She told me as much as she wanted me to know. She said I was not all a gypsy, but I might choose my life when I grew up. She left me with a very kind gypsy nurse, but when she died—they took me to that horrible Mother Hull."

"What a pity your mother should have trusted

them. Well, Helka, when we find David, he will find your father. What was his name?"

"Some day I will show you the letter, then you will know all my strange history. My music I inherited. My father was a fine musician."

The winds of the White Mountains sang a song of tired summer. The leaves brushed the windows, and the two girls fell to dreaming.

Cora thought of Jack, of Ed and of Walter; then of the dear, darling girls! Oh, what would she not give for one moment with them?

Helka dreamed of David—of the handsome boy who had risked his life to get a note to her; then of how he followed her to America, and how he had, ever since, sent her those letters!

Yes, she must risk all for freedom!

CHAPTER XXVI

SURPRISES

"SOME one wants Dr. Robbins on the 'phone."

The hall boy brought the message. Dr. Robbins jumped up from her book and hurried to the hall telephone.

"Yes. Hello! That you, Leland?"

"Yes, dear. So glad to get a word with you. How are you?"

"Well? Now, you really can't be——"

"What? Going away? Run away?"

There was a long pause after this monologue. Dr. Robbins was listening to the voice—presumably that of Leland.

Then—"Leland! Are you crazy?"

Another pause. The young woman's face might have been interpreted, but the 'phone was silent to outsiders.

"You don't mean to say that you are going on some dangerous trip in the mountains—yes, I

hear, in the mountains—to help some foolish girl? I know you did not say foolish; I said that. Leland, listen to me. Do you hear? All right. Now, listen. Don't you dare to go away again and not tell me exactly where you are going. I have only just—yes, I know all about your ideas. I am sure she is charming and worthy and all that, but——"

Dr. Robbins tapped her foot impatiently. Oh, the limits of the telephone! If only she could reach that brother!

"If you do not—report—look for you around Hemlock Bend! Yes, we'll do that. Oh, Leland!"

She dropped the receiver and stood like one shocked physically as well as mentally. For a moment she remained there, then turned back to the room at the side of the girls' suite.

Mr. Rand was sitting there.

"What has happened?" he demanded. "You look as if there had been a ghost in that message."

"Oh, there was, Mr. Rand! What shall I do? That brother of mine is running off again!"

"Where?"

"He didn't even say. His words were like those of some madman. If we did not hear from

him within three days, we are to look for him about Hemlock Bend."

"Where in the world is Hemlock Bend?"

"As if we knew! That is just like Leland. Poor, dear Leland! Never practical enough even to send a straight message. Oh, Mr. Rand, that boy will kill us yet!"

"Don't you fear, little girl," and there was an unmistakable note of tenderness in Mr. Rand's voice. "One who means well usually does well, however strange may be his methods. The first thing to do is to see if we can get him again at the Restover."

Without waiting for her answer, the gentleman rushed out in the hall himself, and was presently calling up that hotel. As he happened to be one of the owners of the summer house, it was not difficult for him to get direct communication and answers. But the man asked for was gone. Had just gone. Had just caught a north-bound train—the express.

"Can't get him there," reported Mr. Rand to Dr. Robbins. "Now to find Hemlock Bend."

Guide books and time-tables were hastily consulted, but evidently the place was too small for printed mention.

Dr. Robbins was in despair. That dreadful

young man! Gone to some out-of-the-world place to rescue some absurd girl! And now he had actually gotten away!

Belle, Bess, Betty and Hazel had just returned from a melancholy ramble. Belle was better—really better now than some of her companions, who had been bearing up well under the strain—but all the young faces were very sad. The boys had telephoned that they had some hope for developments in the clew they had gone away to investigate, but that was very meager encouragement. The boys always had hope—over the 'phone. Dr. Robbins told them part of the story.

"Oh, the idea!" exclaimed Belle. "Isn't that like a tale of the olden times—for a young man to run away to rescue a lady! Now, what in the world is she being rescued from? Exactly. That's the impossible Leland. Never says who she is, what she is, or what about her. Now, as if we could put a story like that together!" She sank back as if mentally exhausted from the effort to "put it together."

"But we must find Hemlock Bend," said Betty. "I feel as if I could lay my finger on every bend in the White Mountains."

"All concentrated on your particular person," said Hazel, with a smile. "Well, I feel that way

myself, only you being smaller, Betty, have a more compact concentration."

"I think I have it," exclaimed Mr. Rand, as he returned with his hands full of pamphlets. "It is near—near——"

"Let me look, Daddy," interrupted Betty. "I can see better, perhaps."

He handed her one little green booklet. She glanced over it and mumbled a lot of stuff through which she had to pass in order to get at what was wanted. Then she paused. "Oh, yes, there's a place on the Woodland Branch railroad called Hemlock Grove. Of course, that must be around the corner from Hemlock Bend."

They all agreed that it must be. Then to take the trip—they would not wait for three days. Mr. Rand said that would be absurd, but when the boys should return to the hotel, which would be that afternoon, they would all start out in their cars. They would make a double hunt—for Cora and for Leland.

"It is a long trip," said Mr. Rand, "but I will take the big car, and Benson—couldn't do it without Benson—and we will be able to ride or to walk almost the length and breadth of the county."

From that moment until the boys did return the

young ladies were all excitement getting ready for the trip.

"I just feel now that something will happen," declared the optimistic Betty. "If four girls and four boys, besides the best man in New England, to wit, my daddy, cannot find them, then, indeed, they are lost."

"Oh, I, too, feel so anxious," sighed Bess. "I think the run will do our nerves good, if nothing else."

"And I feel exactly as if I were starting out to meet Cora," declared Belle. "Oh, what would I give——"

"We all would," interrupted Hazel.

"But to think that Leland should put us to trouble just now when our hands and hearts are so full," wailed Dr. Robbins.

"Well, as misery likes company, perhaps our trouble will get along better in pairs," said Hazel, without knowing exactly what she meant.

Jack entered the corridor. His handsome, dark face was tanned to a deep brown, and he looked different. Had he news?

"Where is Mr. Rand?" he asked.

"Just calling to the garage," said Belle, a note of question in her answer.

"Well, girls, we have found something. We have found Cora's gloves!"

"Oh, where?" It was a chorus.

"On the road to Sharon. I found one—Ed the other."

He took from his pocket the gloves. They were not very much soiled, and had evidently only lain in the road a short time.

"They are the ones she wore the night of the ball, when she disappeared," said Belle, looking at them carefully.

"Then we will take that road and search every inch of it," declared Bess, also inspecting the gloves. "The dear old things!" and she actually pressed them to her lips. "I feel as if you had brought us a message from Cora."

"Those gloves have never been out of doors a week," said Jack seriously. "They have been carried there—placed there—just to throw us off the track. We will start out in the opposite direction."

"To-night?"

"As soon as you girls can get equipped. We must find Cora now or——"

"We *will* find her," cried Bess. "I know we will. Oh, just let us get on the road! I think the

cars will scent the trail! I feel as if I were simply going out to meet her by appointment."

It was a brave effort, for the girls felt anything but certain. So many hopes had arisen and been dashed down! so many clews had been followed, only to be abandoned! so many messages had been sent in vain!

But with such hope as they could muster up the party in four automobiles started out from the Tip-Top. Without exception every guest was interested in the case, and as the motorists chugged off many were the wishes of good luck that were wafted after them.

To find Cora! to find Leland! or——

Another disappointment would seem too cruel. Walter declared he could pick a trail they had never yet followed. Betty said she knew a very dark and dangerous pass, where she had lost her bracelet. Belle wanted to go by the river road, so that when it was actually left to Bess to decide, as she was next in authority to Cora in the Motor Girls' Club, she spoke for the way through the woods, straight up into a rough and shaggy pass.

"They would never dream of an automobile getting up there," she declared, "and if she is in

hiding they have taken her far away from the good roads."

Wonderful for Bess! Wonderful, indeed, is the instinct of love!

Scarcely had they turned into the wooded way than they espied smoke stealing up through the trees.

"There must be some one over there," declared Bess, the first to make the discovery. "See! Yes, there is a flag!"

"Oh, maybe they are those dreadful Gypsies," murmured Belle. "Let us wait for Mr. Rand and the others."

"I am too anxious to see," objected her sister. "The rest are all within calling distance. See, there are the boys. Let us hurry into the side road. Whoever they are, they have had wagons up here."

It required careful driving to cover the pass, for the roadway was newly made, and by no means well-finished. Great stones continually rolled out from under the big, rubber wheels, and Bess was on the alert to use the emergency brake, although the road was somewhat up hill. She feared the motor would stop and that they might back down.

"See!" she exclaimed, "there are children! They must be Gypsy lads and lassies."

Over in a clump of evergreens could be seen some children, playing at a campfire. Yes, they might be Gypsies.

"Wait! wait," called Jack and Ed, who had now observed that the place was inhabited. "We will go in first."

"All right," called back Bess, a little sorry that she could not have had the glory of doing the investigating alone.

By this time most of the searching party had reached the spot.

"We will get out and walk over," suggested Jack, his voice trembling with anticipation.

It was growing dusk, and the smoke seemed to make the woods more uncanny, and the depths blacker and more dismal.

The children in the underbrush had climbed up into the low trees to get a view of the automobiles.

Jack, Ed and Walter were making their way through the brush to reach the spot whence the smoke was coming.

Mr. Rand and his men were hurrying over from the cross road.

"Go slow!" he called, with the disregard of speech that makes a saying stronger.

"All right," answered Jack. "We'll take it carefully."

"It's a camp!" exclaimed Walter, "and Gypsies, I'll wager."

"Oh, I am so frightened!" cried Belle. "Yet I would brave them alone for the sake of dear, darling Cora."

"Of course you would," Betty assured her, as she picked herself up from a fall over some hidden root.

Dr. Robbins had secured a stout stick, and she made her way with more care over the uncertain footing.

"There's a family of them, at any rate," remarked Jack, as he neared the open spot, where now could be seen a hut.

A rough-looking man was waiting to see what they wanted. He smoked a pipe, wore heavy shoes and clothing.

Mr. Rand spoke first.

"Good afternoon, stranger," he said in a pleasant voice.

The man touched his hat and replied with an indistinguishable murmur.

"Camping?" went on Mr. Rand, scarcely knowing how to get into conversation.

"Sort of," replied the man shortly.

"Might we intrude for a little water?" continued the old gentleman. "The girls had a dusty ride."

"Certainly," replied the woodsman, motioning toward a pail and dipper on a bench in front of the hut.

"Hard to get at," whispered Jack to Walter, "but he doesn't look so bad."

"No, I rather think he is not the man we want," agreed the other young man.

"Stay here all year?" asked Ed, as he handed the brimming tin dipper to Bess, and turned to the stranger.

"Pretty much," spoke the man with the pipe. "But is there anything wrong? Anything I could do for you?"

This caused the whole party to surmise that he must have heard that "something" was wrong. That looked suspicious.

A woman emerged from the hut. She was not altogether untidy, but of course showed that she lived far from civilization. She bowed to the party, then called to the children in the woods.

"Well," said Mr. Rand finally, "we are look-

ing for somebody. You haven't happened to hear or to have seen anything of a young girl in these parts, a girl—who might have gotten lost in the woods; have you?"

"I have heard that a girl was lost," replied the man. "But I'm one of the forest rangers and I keep pretty close to my post at this time of the season, watching for fires. There are so many young folks camping and reckless with matches. Is there no trace of her? The missing girl from the hotel, is the one you mean, isn't it?"

Then he was not a gypsy! The forest ranger!

"No, I am sorry to say we have not yet discovered her," went on Mr. Rand. "But you being here in the very depths of the woods would likely know of any gypsy camps about, I believe."

"There are no camps in the woods this year," the man assured him. "We have kept them out of this particular clearing by law. There are a lot of them scattered about in the mountains, but as far as I could find there is no camp deep in the woods. You see every summer someone gets lost in these woods, and we don't like the gypsies to have the first chance of finding them. But sit down," and he cleared the bench of the water pail. "You must have had a weary search."

Everyone sighed. They were still without a possible clew.

"We will rest for a minute or two," said Mr. Rand, "but we must still cover a lot of road to-night. We are out to find her if she is on the White Mountains."

And so after some conversation and advice from the forest ranger the searching party again pressed on.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CALL OF THE HEART

"I AM not the least bit afraid; in fact, I think I shall just sing to show them I feel secure," and Cora snatched up the guitar. She fingered it tenderly, then let it rest for a moment in her arms. "Did Lena say it was all right?"

"The dogs are drugged. I didn't have the heart to kill the brutes, ugly as they are. They will not awaken."

"Good! Then everything else will be all right. Oh, Helka, can you imagine we are so near freedom?"

"I never was frightened before. Whether it is the thought of meeting David, or whether it is the thought of leaving them all, I cannot say, but I am shaking from head to foot," said the queen.

"That is natural. You have been with them almost all your life. But I shall show you what real life is. This is slavery."

Helka looked about her uneasily. "What shall we do first?"

"When it is very dark, and all are in bed, I will fasten the rope to the big nail that Lena fetched. Then I shall try it from this side, and if it holds me I will slip down. Then I shall run. When you no longer hear the leaves rustle, or if you can hear the whistle I will give you as a signal, then you must come."

"And if you go, and I cannot get out! Oh, Cora, I should die here alone now!"

"Faint heart! Be brave! Be strong! Say you will win!"

Cora was jubilant. To her it meant freedom! She had no fear of detection. All she thought of was success. To get away and then to send word to her dear ones!

Lena tapped on the door.

"Helka," she said, "could I, too, go?"

"You, Lena—why?"

"I will not be happy without Helka and without the good lady. I, too, would go away!"

Her eyes were sad, and her voice trembled.

"Why, Lena, they would search the earth for you—you are a real gypsy," said Helka.

"But I have no mother, no father, and what right have they to me? In the world I could

learn, I would work for you, I would be—your slave!"

The poor girl was almost in tears. Her manner pleaded her cause more eloquently than could any words.

"How would you go?" asked the queen.

"When I go out to lock the barn, I would just run, and run through the woods. I would wait for you at the big oak."

"Where is Sam?" asked Helka.

"He went out with the wagon this afternoon. He will not be back."

"And Mother Hull?"

"Smoking by the fire. She will sleep. I have put some powder in her tobacco."

Cora murmured a protest.

"Oh, she likes it," and the queen smiled. "To-night it will be a treat. But the men—the guards?"

"One went to gamble his money that you gave him; the other is out with his fishing pole. I have fixed it all."

"Good girl. You told him I wanted fish for breakfast, and you told the other he could spend his money at the inn. Lena, I wish you *could* come with us."

"I *am* going. I will not stay here."

"But in the morning, when they find three gone —what then?"

"In the morning," said Cora, "it does not matter what. We shall be safe some place. Yes, Lena, we will take you. This is no life for any girl."

Lena fell on her knees and kissed Cora's hands wildly. She had befriended Cora ever since she saw her lying so still and white in that awful wagon, and now she might get her reward.

"You will come up with tea when everything is safe," said Helka. "That will be our signal."

Lena went away with a smile on her thin lips. True, she was a real gypsy girl, but she longed for another life, and felt keenly the injustice of that to which she was enslaved.

"Then I will sing," said Cora. "See, the stars are coming out. The night will help us. I have marked every turn in the path. I pretended to be moving the stones from the grass, and I was placing them where I could feel them—in the dark."

"You are a wonderful girl, Cora, and your world must also be wonderful. I have no fear of its strange ways—but my money? How shall I ever be able to get that?"

"Never fear about the money," replied Cora

cheerily. "What is rightfully yours you will get. My friends are always the friends of justice."

"And they will not fear the tribe?"

"The tribe will fear them. Wait and see. Now, what shall I sing—the 'Gypsy's Warning?' "

"Yes," and Helka lay back on her low divan.

Again Cora fingered the guitar. Daintily her fingers awoke the chords. Then she sang, first low, then fuller and fuller until her voice rang out in the night.

"Trust him not, oh, gentle lady,
Though his voice be low and sweet,
For he only seeks to win you,
Then to crush you at his feet!"

At each stanza Cora seemed to gain new power in her voice. Helka raised herself on her arm. She was enchanted. The last line had not died on Cora's lips when Helka repeated:

"Yes, I am the gypsy's only child!"

The remark was rather a plaint, and Cora came over very close to Helka.

"You must teach me a new song," she said. "I want one to surprise my friends with."

"Then you are so sure of reaching them?"

"Positive. All America will seem small to me when I am free," and she patted the hand of the queen.

"Free!" repeated the other. "I had never thought this captivity until you came; then I felt the power of a civilized world, and I felt the bondage of this."

The girls were speaking in subdued tones. A single word might betray them if overheard. Yet they were too nervous to remain silent, and Helka seemed so impressed, so agitated, at the thought of leaving, forever, her strange life.

"Do you think it is safe about Lena?" she asked. "I would not like to get that faithful child into trouble."

"It would be much safer to take her than to leave her here," Cora reasoned, "for when they found us gone they would surely blame her."

"Yes, that is so. Well, I have never prayed, that has always seemed a weak sort of way to struggle," said the queen, "but it seems to me now that I must seek strength from some One more powerful than those of earth. There *must* be such a power."

"Indeed there is," replied Cora. "But now let us be happy. See the stars, how they glitter," and she turned back the drapery from the window. "And see, we shall have a great, big, bright moon to show us our way."

"Hush!" whispered Helka. "I heard a step. Listen!"

Neither spoke for some moments. Then Cora said:

"It was someone in the hall, but the person has gone down the stairs."

"I wonder who it could be? Lena would come in."

"Perhaps that little, frowsy Christine. She seems to stay out of nights. I heard her last night when you were sleeping. I really think she came in very late, crept upstairs, and then I am sure she tried this door."

"She did! Why did you not call me?"

"Well, I was positive it was she, and I did not want to make trouble. You see she has been listening again."

"She belongs to another tribe and has only come here lately," said Helka. "I have always suspected she was sent to spy on me. If it were not just to-night—this very night—I would call her to an account."

"If the child is under orders," intervened Cora, "you can scarcely trust her to do otherwise than spy. But what do they want to know about you that they cannot readily find out?"

"You could scarcely understand it dear. We have rival tribes, and they each want me—or my money."

"There is another step! There seems to be so many noises to-night."

"Perhaps that is only because we are listening."

"We want to listen, and we want to hear," and Cora put her ear to the keyhole.

"Are they gone?"

Cora did not answer at once. Then she turned to Helka.

"I am sure I heard two voices. Should we call? Or ask who is there?"

"No, it will be better to take our chances. It would be awful to be disappointed now," said the queen in a whisper.

"Surely Lena would not have betrayed us?"

"Never. She is as faithful as—my right hand."

"Of course! But I cannot help being afraid of everything. Helka, we should take some refreshment. That will give us courage."

"I hope Lena will soon fetch the tea," and the queen sighed. "This suspense is dreadful."

"But it will pay us in the end. If we made a mistake now——"

Cora stopped.

A tap came at the door, at which both girls fairly jumped.

"I will answer," said Helka, immediately regaining her composure. She opened the door.

"I forgot my lesson book in your room to-day," said a voice that proved to be that of Christine, "and may I get it?"

"Not to-night," answered Helka decisively. "You should not forget things, and it is too late for lessons."

"But the man—Jensen—says I must get it. He is my teacher, and he is below."

"Tell him Helka says you must go to bed: to bed, do you hear? At once! I will have Lena see how you obey me."

The girl turned away. Helka locked the door.

"What does that mean?" asked Cora anxiously.

"They are watching us. We must be very cautious. But she is only a timid child and she will go to bed. I do wonder what is keeping Lena?"

"If they should keep her down stairs all night,

then could we not venture to leave?" asked Cora.

"I don't know. They might suspect, and they might keep Lena. You take up the guitar and I will ring."

Cora obeyed. How her hands trembled! To be found out would almost mean death to both of them.

Helka pulled the cord that rang the hall bell. Then they waited, but there was no answer. She pulled it again, and after a few minutes she heard the familiar step of Lena.

She opened the door before the Gypsy girl had a chance to knock.

A wild gesture of the girl's hands told Helka not to speak. Then she entered the room.

"They are watching," she whispered, and without waiting for a reply she darted out into the hall again and crept down the stairs.

"Can't we——"

"Hush!" cautioned the queen as she pressed Cora's hands to bid her keep up her courage.

It seemed hours. Would the trees never stop rustling, and would the steps below never cease their shuffling?

"I have said that this was to be my night of music," whispered Helka. "The night of the full moon always is. So we must have music!"

A long line of automobiles had rumbled along the narrow road. Not a horn sounded, not one of the cars gave any warning. It was night in the White Mountains, and besides the party from the Tip-Top, who had been searching from late that afternoon, there were also, on Mr. Rand's orders, two officers in a runabout.

"Which way?" called the boys from their car. "Sounds like water!"

"Oh, mercy!" exclaimed Bess, who was quite near. "Don't let us run over a falls!"

"No danger!" came back from the Rand car. "That water is half a mile away."

"This is rather unsafe for the girls, though," said Jack to Ed. "I wonder if they don't want to change cars?"

"I have just asked Bess and Betty," replied Ed, "and they would not hear of it. Strange that such timid girls can be so plucky on occasions."

"They're game all right," observed Jack. "I almost feel, now that we are out in the woods, that Cora is along. It is tough to think anything else."

"Perhaps she is. I never felt as encouraged as I do to-night," declared Ed. "Somehow we started out to win and we've got to do it!"

Now, the one great difficulty of this searching

tour was that of not sounding the horns, consequently they had to feel their way, as on almost any part of the mountain roads there might be stray cottagers, or campers, or rustics, in danger of being run down.

The lights flashed brightly as if trying to do their part in the search for Cora Kimball.

Giant trees threw formidable shadows, and smaller ones whispered the secrets of the wood. But the girls and boys, and the women and men were too seriously bent upon their work to notice any signs so unimportant.

Suddenly Jack turned off his power. He wanted to listen.

"Did you hear anything?" asked Ed.

"Thought I did, but these evergreens make all sorts of noises."

"The others are making for the hill. We had best not lose sight of them," suggested Ed.

At this Jack started up again and was soon under way. But something had sounded "human." He felt that there must be some sort of life near them.

In a few minutes he was alongside the other cars.

"What kept you?" asked Bess, eager for anything new.

"Nothing," replied Ed. "We just wanted to listen."

"We will leave the cars here and walk. I thought I saw a light," said Jack.

"I am sure I did," declared Bess. "Oh, if only we find a cave, there are enough of us——"

"The young ladies should not venture too deep in the woods," suggested Officer Brown. "We had best leave them with one of the young men here."

"Oh, no," objected Belle. "We must go with you. We are better in a crowd."

"Just as you say. But look! Is not that a light?"

They were almost in front of the old house. Cora and Helka were tying the rope to the open window.

"Sing! Sing!" whispered Lena, at the door. "Mother Hull is listening."

Quickly Cora picked up the instrument again, and, although voice and hands trembled, she sang once more the last verse of the "Gypsy's Warning," while Helka played her little harp.

"Hark! Hark!" shrieked Bess. "That is Cora's voice! Listen!"

Spellbound they stood.

"Yes," shouted Belle. "That's Cora!"

"Oh, quick," gasped Betty, "she may stop, and then——"

A rustle in the bushes close by startled them. A man groped his way out.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Oh, Leland!"

It was Miss Robbins who uttered the words. She made her way up to the stranger, and while the others stood dumfounded she threw herself in the stranger's arms.

"You, Regina? Here?"

"Yes, is this the Hemlock Bend? Oh, to think that we have found you!"

"But I must go! That was her harp. That was Lillian—somewhere in that thick woods!"

"And the voice was Cora's," interrupted Jack. "Where can she be—to sing, and to sing like that?"

The detectives with Mr. Rand were pressing on. They soon emerged from the thicket and saw the old mansion.

"That is the Bradly place," said Officer Brown. "Only an old woman and a couple of girls live there. That is no place for one to be kidnapped."

"No matter who is there," declared Bess, "I heard Cora sing, and that is Cora's song, 'The Gypsy's Warning.' "

"And I heard Lillian play," declared Dr. Robbins' brother. "I have promised to rescue her to-night."

"And that is why you came?" asked his sister.

"Yes, she is there, in a gypsy den!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

VICTORY

"Is SHE asleep?" asked Cora, as Lena poked her head in the door again.

"Yes, and she will not wake. You may go!"

"One more little song," begged Helka. "I may never play my lute again."

"Why, Lena could bring it," suggested Cora. "It is not much to carry; and your box, I will take that."

Helka ran her fingers over the strings.

"Sing," she said, and Cora sang.

"His voice is calling sweet and low!"
'Babbette! Pierro!'
He rows across, he takes her hand,
And then they sail away!"

"Yes," interrupted Helka, "he will come, and he will take my hand. Let us go!"

"There! There!" screamed Bess. "That was Cora's voice!"

"And that was Lillian's lute! Did I not give it to her?" insisted the strange young man, Leland.

"Then our lost ones are together," said Jack. "I am going!"

"Wait! Wait!" begged the detectives. "The dogs in there would tear you to pieces!"

"They must eat my hot lead first," said Jack grimly, drawing his revolver.

"No, wait," implored Mr. Rand. "A false move now may spoil it all."

Every man, young and old, in the party took out his revolver and had it in readiness. Then, in a solid line, they deliberately walked up to the old house—through the path lined with boxwood over the little flower garden.

"Yes, there is a light See it near the roof?"

The girls were almost on the heels of the men. They could not be induced to remain in the lane.

"What is that?"

"A woman's voice," said Officer Brown. "She is calling the dogs!"

But no dogs came. Instead, a girl, Lena, confronted them.

"What do you want?" she demanded rather rudely.

"You," said the younger officer—Graham by name—and as he spoke he seized her arm.

"I am only Lena. I have done nothing. Let me go. Help! help!" shrieked the girl.

This aroused the old woman. She flung open the door and stood with lantern in hand.

"Lena! Lena," she shrieked. "The dogs! Where are the dogs?"

But Lena did not answer.

Sam! Jack! Tipo! Where are you all? What does this mean?"

The searchers stood for a moment considering what was best to do. As they did so something came dangling down—the rope from the window near the roof!

"Cora!"

She fell into the very arms of Bess.

Another moment and a second form slid down in that same mysterious way.

It was Helka! And Leland was there to grasp her.

"Lillian!" he murmured.

"Oh, David! Am I—are we safe!"

The door had slammed shut and the old woman was gone.

"Is this the girl we are after?" exclaimed the officer in astonishment.

"None other," declared Mr. Rand. "And I say, boys, just pick these girls up and carry them. That will be no task for you."

Cora was weeping on Jack's shoulder, Helka was folded in Leland's arms. To her he was David.

"What happened?" asked Betty.

"Don't leave Lena," begged Cora. "She must come with us!"

"Simply get everybody down on the road," suggested Mr. Rand, "then we may be able to tell Lena from Cora and all the rest."

How different it was going back over that path! How merrily the girls prattled, and how excited were the men!

It was Cora! Cora! Cora!

And it was Helka! My friend Helka!

Then Lillian. And David! Even Lena!

It was well the automobiles had a few spare seats, for there were now four new passengers to be taken back to the Tip-Top.

"Belle!" said Cora, when she could get her voice, "however did you venture out here?"

"Now, Cora," and Belle protested feebly, "I have been very ill, since you left; and you know I would have gone anywhere to help find you. Anywhere in the world!"

Cora kissed her fondly. Nothing and no one could resist teasing Belle.

"Of course you would! But who has Lena?"

"She is with the Rands," replied Bess, "but we claimed you. Oh, Cora Kimball!"

As only girls know how to show affection, this sort was now fairly showered upon the rescued girl.

"It almost seemed worth while to have been lost," Cora managed to say.

"When shall we hear all about it?" asked Belle.

"Not to-night," objected the twin sister. "It is enough to know that we have Cora."

The automobiles were rumbling on. Every mile post took them farther from the gypsies, and nearer the hotel.

"Hey there!" called Mr. Rand. "You boys keep a tight hold!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" shouted back Walter. "Seems to me Mr. Rand is getting very gay," he remarked to Betty.

"He simply means," said the dutiful daughter, "that you must look carefully after the girls. They might be after us—the gypsies, I mean.

"Oh," said Walter, in that way that Walter had.

CHAPTER XXIX

A REAL LOVE FEAST

"HOWEVER did it happen?" demanded Belle.

"Please let the child draw her breath," insisted Mr. Rand. "Remember, she has been kidnapped —a prisoner, a slave!"

"No, not that," objected Helka. "She was my guest."

"I knew we would find her," declared Betty, crowding up to Cora's chair.

"We didn't," contradicted Ed, "she found us. She simply——"

"Flopped down on us," finished Jack. "Cora, I never knew I loved you until I lost you."

"Oh, yes, you did, Jackie. You always made sugary speeches when—you wanted small change."

"And the dogs?" asked the detectives. "What happened to them?"

"We put them to sleep!" announced Cora, in

the gravest possible tones. "Do you know, we never could have done it but for Lena."

"Lena shall be rewarded," declared Walter.

"Wallie!" warned Jack.

"The newest girl!" whispered Belle.

"At any rate, no one can steal Helka," said Cora, glancing over at Lillian and David. "But how does he come to be Leland?" The question was aimed at Dr. Robbins.

"Oh, that boy! He must change everything—even his name, although it really is Leland David."

"David for strength, of course," said Cora. "Oh, I just must scream! Think of it! No more dogs! No more eating off the floor——"

She caught Helka's eye. "What is it, Cora?" asked the gypsy queen. Cora clasped her arms about her.

"Isn't she beautiful?" whispered Belle. "Did you ever see such a face?"

"Glorious," pronounced Betty.

"But say, Betty, did you notice how the daddy takes up with the doc?" said Ed. "I am dreadfully afraid of stepmothers."

"I'm not," said Betty, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders. "I rather like them."

"Had one on trial?" teased the boy.

"No, on probation," braved Betty.

"Then," said the officer, aside to Mr. Rand, "we shall raid the place!"

"Exactly, exactly! There may be more girls under the stoop or up the chimney. That place should not be allowed to stand."

"It was a great find," admitted the officer, "but I never would have been able to do anything if the young ladies had not recognized the voice. That place has been there for years. The Bradly house would have got past any of us."

"Yes, the girls helped," said Mr. Rand proudly. "I have a great regard for girls."

"You say silver was stolen from the seashore cottage? Likely it is in that place."

"Haven't the slightest doubt of it, and more, too, I'll wager. Now, boys"—to the officers—"you have done a good night's work. We're a happy family, and I don't want to keep you longer from yours." So, with promises to soon overhaul the old Bradly house, the men of the law departed.

"But why did you sing, Cora? How could you?" asked Ed.

"Oh, I knew I was soon going to be happy, and wanted to get used to it," said Cora, with a laugh.

"You haven't failed," said Dr. Robbins.

"Praise from you? No, thanks to my good friend, we had everything but liberty. Didn't we, Helka?"

"Oh, she's too busy. Let her alone," suggested Jack, his face radiant.

"And you have on my bracelet! Cora Kimball!" accused Betty.

"Another link in the endless chain," explained Cora vaguely. "That is a present from Gypsy Land."

"Suppose we eat," suggested the practical Mr. Rand. "I have cabled Mrs. Kimball. She had not yet sailed."

"Oh, poor, darling mother!" exclaimed Cora, her eyes filling.

"Poor, darling—you," added Jack, not hesitating to kiss her openly.

"Next!" called Ed.

"Halves on that!" demanded Walter.

"Fenn!" shouted Cora, for, indeed, the boys threatened to carry out the game.

"Maybe you would like—a minister," suggested Mr. Rand mischievously, glancing at the undisturbed Helka and David.

"For a couple of jobs?" asked Walter, looking keenly at Mr. Rand and carrying the same look into Dr. Robbins' face.

"Well, I don't mind," replied the gentleman. "Betty is getting beyond my control."

But Lillian, the gypsy queen, was not in such a hurry to wed, even her princely David. She would have a correct trousseau, and have a great wedding, with all the motor girls as maids. Her fear of the clan was entirely dispelled, just as Cora said it would be when she breathed the refreshing air of American freedom.

"So you are the Motor Girls?" she asked, trying to comprehend it all.

"They call us that," said Bess.

Then the porter announced supper, and at the table were seated fifty guests—all to welcome back Cora and to sing the praises of the real, live, up-to-date motor girls.

There is little more to tell. A few days later the house where Cora had been held a prisoner was raided, but there was no one there; the place had been stripped, and of Mother Hull and the unscrupulous men not a trace remained.

But Tony Slavo was not so lucky. He was still in the clutches of the law, and there he remained for a long time, for he was convicted of the robbery of the Kimball cottage.

Cora arranged to have the gypsy girl, Lena, sent to a boarding school. As for Lillian, who re-

sumed her real name, Mr. Rand engaged a lawyer for her, and most of the wealth left to her was recovered from another band of gypsies who had control of it. So there was a prospect of new happiness for her and Leland, who promised to give up his odd ways, at least for a time.

Cora soon recovered from the effects of her captivity and she formed a warm friendship for the former gypsy queen, even as did the other motor girls.

"Oh, but wasn't it exciting, though?" exclaimed Bess one afternoon, when, after leaving the Tip-Top Hotel they had resumed their tour through New England. "I shall never forget how I felt when I saw Cora coming down that rope from the window."

"Nor I, either," added Belle.

"I wonder——"

"Who's kissing her now?" interrupted Jack, with a laugh.

"Silly boy! I was going to say I wonder what will happen to us next vacation."

"Hard to tell," declared Ed.

"Let's arrange for us boys to get lost, and for the girls to find us," proposed Walter.

"Don't consider yourselves of such importance," said Hazel, but she blushed prettily.

"Oh, well, it's all in the game," declared Jack. "I feel in my bones that something will happen."

It did, and what it was will be told in the next volume of this series, to be entitled, "The Motor Girls on Cedar Lake; Or, The Hermit of Fern Island." In that we will meet with the young ladies and their friends again, and hear further of Cora's resourcefulness in times of danger.

The tour through New England came to an end one beautiful day, when, after a picnic at a popular mountain resort, our friends turned their cars homeward.

And so, as they are scudding along the pleasant roads, on which the dried leaves—early harbingers of autumn—were beginning to fall—we will take leave of the motor girls.

THE END

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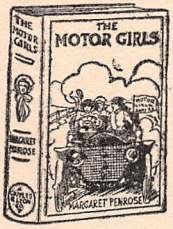

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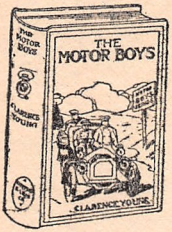

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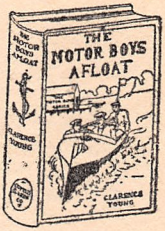

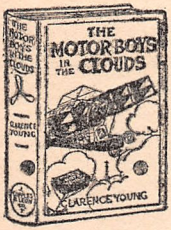

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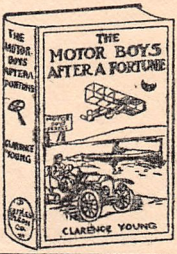

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